

Robert De Andreis was born in San Francisco thirty-six years ago, a fifth generation native. When he came out in the mid-seventies as a young teenager, gay San Francisco was in full swing. He graduated from Lowell, S.F.'s top academic public high school and later, at age twenty, received his B.A. with honors in drawing and painting from S.F.S.U..

During college he studied classical ballet, and went to continue his dance training at the School of American Ballet in New York City. He returned to San Francisco to start a master's program in film production at S.F.S.U. and had a short film shown in the Gay and Lesbian Film Festival.

During the mid-eighties, Robert moved to Los Angeles with his lover to pursue a film career and worked at Paramount Studios as an archivist. After testing HIV positive, he quit that job, and split up with his lover in order to focus on his new health issue.

He studied "A Course in Miracles," attended Marianne Williamson and Louise Hays lectures, wrote a newsletter for an alternative AIDS treatment buyers club and started a new career as an elementary school teacher. With his asymptomatic days drawing to a close, he moved back to San Francisco three years ago to be closer to his family.

Two years ago he contracted PCP and subsequently took a leave from teaching. He lived in virtual seclusion for a year. By chance, an old friend was working at the Sentinel and mentioned they were looking for new writers. Robert submitted an article on a whim; they published it and he's been writing his HIV commentary column every week since.

Lo and behold, a compilation at last! By the time you read this I may be long dead or a long way from dead, depending on fate's bitchy hand. Either way, this material is about death and facing my own mortality.

I had always been such a private person and I never intended to blow the lid off of my life and reveal so much. All my life I wanted to be heard, but it was hard to get people to take me seriously during my youth because God cursed me with an old soul slapped on a young face. I ended up meeting hundreds of men, in all kinds of situations, by virtue of my looks. I learned the most by keeping my mouth shut and listening to the stories of their lives and I value those steamy days and the insights I gained from throwing myself into the fire - a small sacrifice for experiential wisdom.

When I first started writing about AIDS I no had idea where I could possibly go with it. I was well aware of all the perfunctory anger that forced us to grow up or die in the wake of this plague: the government, generalized homophobia and the immaturity of the new gay community. But that anger wasn't mine. I had always been annoyed and disappointed by those pedestrian views that minimized the journey of every man; we all deal with the deceptive mask of death, AIDS or no AIDS. As I became more involved with my own AIDS story of the week, I identified the personal issues deep within me to be tackled. I realized the most empowering thoughts were the least AIDS-specific and I wrote more of the universal questions of mortality, forgiveness and kissing this world good-bye. It's the personal that people care most about in this crisis. We want to know about the emotional components of the disease, how we feel and how we express these emotions to ourselves and others. I have found that diving into these issues, regardless of how painful, is the best thing I can do on the AIDS front line.

Initially, I worked in a vacuum. My column may have been popular, but I remained a virtual recluse, receiving the smallest bits of feedback month after month. After I nearly died from an onslaught of opportunistic infections in Spring '94, I had a reprise and I took that as a sign to get more serious about my writing. I printed an address where readers could contact me and the results gave my work a second wind.

A reader wrote that under any other time in history my fledgling literary skills may have achieved a certain kind of recognition but it's swept under by the torrential downpour of AIDS deaths. A huge generation is forever lost but, as artists, we live on in the work we leave behind. But this is no time for formalities, there is a plague out there that doesn't seem to be going away and if a glimpse into my private thoughts, fears and fury can help you slay your own dragons, then take my fire and run with it!

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# Don't Ask, Don't Tell - Disclosing Your Status

JUNE 23, 1993

**The politically correct time and place of telling your sex partner you are HIV positive often takes a back seat to the dictates of your dick - without a brain in its head, it has a mind of its own, backing you into tight corners and dark situations.**

If you have just had sex with some stranger without a condom, tell a therapist because you are an asshole in need of serious work. If you have safe sex in a sex club, why tell, unless he wants to see you again. Then I'd mention it early on before things get complicated.

Of course, the more honest you are soon enough, the easier things will be. Unlike my ex. He met this hot nineteen-year old a few years ago and never had the balls to tell him - even though they continue to live together. He has also not gotten a t-cell count in four years. What seems impossibly irrational and immoral to some is standard fare to others. Be

forewarned - the guy in front of you could be a liar.

If you act as if every guy you have sex with is positive, your ass is covered. It is not your sole responsibility to divulge - your partner is equally responsible to ask if he's so concerned. My favorite bullshit line is when the guy says he hasn't been tested when you ask. I presume that is a wimpy way of saying he's positive. Who in there right mind hasn't been tested yet?

Life itself is risky business. You can walk around covered in Saran Wrap all your life or you can get out there and express your sexuality. AIDS is not a gift from the universe or a blessing in disguise - but it has caused us to stretch out sexual imaginations. Quite frankly, I got so bored with all those hundreds of technically correct bookstore blow jobs that I learned to needlepoint standing up.

Sometimes you don't have to disclose your status - it is revealed for you. Like when you're playing around with

some hot guy in the afternoon and Project Open Hand knocks on your door. Or when you take off your shirt and you forgot to remove the tape on your arm from this morning's visit to the lab. Or when you get up early while your guest's still asleep to discretely grind up your DDI. My friend, Ed, recently got TB and had to wear a tell-tale blue face mask. I suggested he cover it with a natural soft-beige foundation and draw in some lips.

What about at work? Let's say you have to take lots of time out for doctor's appointments, or the stress of work is affecting your health. Although there maybe laws covering you, discrimination works in insidious ways. Be careful, be discreet. Conversely, sometimes there is more stress created by you in a situation by NOT telling. Many times the ailing employee runs worst-case scenarios in his mind and is actually pleasantly relieved to find a sympathetic and understanding boss may

make considerate concessions to your situations and reduce your worry considerably.

What do you think your family would rather hear? "Mom, Dad, I'm HIV positive," or "Mom, Dad, I have full-blown AIDS." Don't presume they can't handle it - you'll short-change yourself. In times of crisis, even the sourest of relations often come through in surprising ways. Get them in on the act early on - early intervention applies to emotional support as well. Don't deny anyone the opportunity to help you in anyway. The HIV experience is about learning to receive - in ways other than the route of transmission.

Ask yourself - what can I gain from disclosing? Sometimes the moral weight of concealing your status puts on added weight of stress on an emotionally overloaded system. These days, I'm proud of myself for telling potential boyfriends right off the bat. And feeling good about yourself

is half the battle. If they can't handle it, why would I want them around anyway?



**Quite frankly, I got so bored with all those hundreds of technically correct bookstore blow jobs that I learned to needlepoint standing up.**

# Does Waiting To Die Bore You To Death?

JUNE 30, 1993

**Y**ou know your days are numbered - but what's the number? Weeks, months, years - what? It's like waiting for the Big One - it could strike at any time. How do we get through our day to day lives without rattling our gay nerves, knowing that at any moment the light could dim at the end tunnel?

Let's say you quit your job after your first opportunistic bout. You're on disability, getting hearty meals from Project Open Hand and those great Paratransit reduced cab fare booklets. Your friends rally around you and you're getting your affairs in order. Then something happens. You're not getting sick. You've removed the stresses from your life and your immune system is perking back to life. You've got lot's of time on your hands. The devil makes work for idle hands - with help from a

hot video and a little lube. You've made napkin holders with tongue depressors and circus animals from colored condoms. Days and weeks drag on if you have nothing constructive to do with your time. You can join an AIDS support group but sometimes they turn into "And Then There Were None." Or you can look at your life in a fresh new way.

This can be a time of reflection and circumspection. Or you can be in denial - there are a lot of uncircumspected men out there. Socrates once said "A life unexamined is a life not worth living." It's time to look at the cheap drama of your past. If there isn't any - it's not too late to create some.

Healing is letting go and forgiving those who gave you shit. It comes in the form of peace of mind - a highly desired state. It doesn't necessarily mean that those lesions are going

to dry up overnight just because you're releasing old anger. But it will make your remaining days on Earth more peaceful.

Whatever you do, stay away from daytime television. From Kathy Lee, Sally, Oprah and Jenny - these mic hoppers with their bouncy studio audiences will distort your sense of reality. Soon you will be making up show titles in your mind describing your own situation. "Codependent mothers of unattractive HIV-negative sons who date hot asymptomatic HIV-positive men with attitude." Besides, who needs to see commercials all day on Slim-Fast and ultra absorb-lock products? Those days come soon enough.

Keep yourself busy - not with busy work but with meaningful projects. Set a goal and see it through. Quilting, gardening, reading - whatever. Start small and work your way

up to more ambitious projects. Like doing a faux finish on the facade of your apartment building or weeding the west side of Golden Gate Park.

Take advice from Joan in *Milred Pierce*. "Vita, get out of this house - get out, get out before I throw you out (slap)." You may slap your own face for emphasis. Get out of your house while you still can. Lord knows there will be down times when you can't. If you can still walk, go on wonderful hikes in your neighborhood. It's a healthy cardio-vascular workout. Climbing those hills will give you a nice round butt - but that's what got you into trouble in the first place.

Most of all - come to peace with your new situation. The alternative is denial and depression, both big time immune gobblers. We all come to peace with life's cruelties in different ways. No one gets off the planet alive - even your

smug HIV-positive friends. Their dark day will come on day, too. In the mean time, enjoy life's simple pleasures. And remember - you're an AIDS survivor until the day you die.



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# Louise Hay - What's Love Got To Do With It?

JULY 7, 1993

**R**emember **eighties** AIDS guru, Louise Hay - with her simple message. Heal your life - look in a mirror and say, "I love you." Well, that mirror's cracked, honey, with bad luck on the way if you think she's the only AIDS diva in town.

A few years ago in L.A., when I was still with hunky Bob, he came home one day and said he just met the late porn star, Tim Krammer. But he wasn't interested - blondes gave him gas. A week later Tim called and we started to chat. The next thing I knew, I was driving my old Mercury Comet to his condo in West Hollywood.

I was intrigued to learn Tim owned the Nutritional Products Buyers Club - selling promising underground AIDS products not available elsewhere. One day Tim called me from his car phone because he was in the neighborhood. And I broke our "don't bring anyone home" rule. (I figured he was coming over, I was not bringing him anywhere.)

After we played around, I looked out the window and saw Bob's car pull up! I grabbed Tim's clothes in a panic and shoved him out on the fire escape - butt naked! Bob looked up and, well, never quite forgot it.

But I did manage to get a job at his Buyers Club as an archivist and newsletter writer. Soon I was smack in the middle of AIDS information. Melissa, our acupuncturist, kept trying to drag me to a "Hay Ride" down the street - a woman named Louise Hay was packing them in, up to four hundred, every Wednesday night.

Because I am not a group person, I was skeptical. But soon I became a regular - wearing that name tag, sharing my story, hugging strangers and singing that song with the group at the end, "I Love Myself the Way I am." I thought Louise was a hoot, I loved her message and met some great new friends. I failed to see the controversy.

She never said you get sick because you don't love yourself, although self-hate can be just another nail in the coffin. She says when you

love yourself, even if you get sick, other things fall into place that can make rest and recovery more peaceful. You'll take better care of yourself, set limits, and surround yourself with love and support. Who knows? You may even get better.

But her detractors are on the right track - for other reasons. Any time powerful teachers arrive on the scene, they attract vulnerable people seeking a quick fix. It's healthy to question anybody who comes along and tells you how to live - or how to die.

But in the heyday of the Hay Rides, I found Louise to be genuinely warm and gentle. And she always looked her diva best - with platinum hair and vibrant outfits. Yet at parties she could be painfully shy. I'd see her sit in the corner like a nobody, taking a hit and passing it back.

That year, the theme of Gay Pride was "AIDS, Breaking Down Stone Walls." The float for the Hay Ride was always one of the best but this year they couldn't pull it together because the master carpenter got sick. Bob came to the rescue. With a tool

pack slung around his tight waist and a hammer in his hand, he took off his shirt and sweated blood until the whole thing was built.

On the morning of the parade, we jam packed it with the Hay Ride regulars and rode down Santa Monica Boulevard past cheering crowds. I was so proud of Bob - except when he kept jumping off the float to say hi to his "friends."

The experience I had with Louise was not about words - I never listened to her tapes. There was such a spirit of camaraderie and caring during those meetings, and love had everything to do with it.

What's love got to do with it? That's what Bob and I said about outside tricking. So when he asked me how work was going, I told the truth. I said I was learning so much about AIDS but was annoyed because Tim continued to paw me. He'd call me on the intercom to come over to his office while my co-worker, his lover Wayne, wondered where I was. Or a customer would come in and he'd would shove me in the closet and ask Wayne, "Have you seen Robert?"

Well, Bob saw red - his favorite color. The next day he stormed into Tim's West Hollywood office, slammed him up against the wall, and cleared off his desk with the back of his hand. "Is this any way to treat your employees? This is sexual harassment, and Robert's sick of it." Tim didn't know what hit him, but I did. Bob lives for moments like that.

Whether it's Louise Hay, Marianne Williamson or Tina Turner - learn what you can from these survival divas. But become a student, not a fan, and know when to leave. You learn the most from teachers when you walk away.



# The Worried-Well Can Go To Hell

JULY 14, 1993

**I'm sick of sick people tip-toeing around town under wide-brimmed hats with sweeping veils trying not to worry the worried-well. And why should they? If our sick brothers were truly welcome in the Castro, there would be wheelchair ramps in every restaurant and IV hook-ups at every bar.**

If you worry warts are so afraid of catching AIDS, stay home, pull down the shades and lock the door. If you are going to sit around a support group once a week like a bunch of oxymoron's, toquiver and shake, don't invite me - or I'll give you something to really worry about.

Every six months or so, I see a sight that moves me deeply. It's the sight of a patient, swaddled in blankets with Ray Bans and a baseball cap, being pushed in a wheelchair

through the Castro for that one last look - much the same way E.T. was hidden under wraps on his secret bike ride back home.

Sometimes the terminally ill can take on an extra-terrestrial look, in a haunting and regal sort of way, as if they are preparing to return to a place far away and long ago. Their thinning faces reveal aristocratic bone structure, they are waited on hand and foot, and they walk with the slow grace of royalty - during their last reigning days on Earth.

They are the bravest, ballsiest men I know. Who in their right mind would hit the Castro knowing they looked their absolute worst? So what, maybe they aren't in their right mind, but the real disservice is how they are received on the street. Heads avert, guys wince and scoot out of the way. In a kinder world they would be greeted by smiles and warm wishes. Instead we pretend we don't see

them. Then later, we can't get them out of our minds.

If this town has hundreds of men sick and dying, where are they? In darkened rooms with the shades drawn tight? In ratty cellars under ratty quilts? Come out, come out, where ever you are. Have you seen the new palm trees on Market Street? Okay, you can go back home now.

Your job, as someone living with AIDS, is not to make everyone else feel okay about it. My friend, Australian activist Bruce Brown, met with me after returning home from the AIDS conference and said he actually went to a bathhouse in Berlin. "But Bruce," I said, "You can almost wrap a washcloth around that hrinking waist of yours."

He didn't care. He just wanted to experience something one last time and screw the rest. I know some of you men can't leave the house before you scruff, peel, moisturize, pluck, powder and fart. So why

should you sick boys care what others think about your appearance? God kows you look fabulous.

I later ran into Bruce on the street and he was wearing a tank top. On him it looked blousy. But there he was, still standing tall, with the same mischievous smirk he had on his face when we first tricked eons ago. I was proud to be his friend and walk with him. He didn't give a hoot about startling the worried well. In fact, he ended up meeting someone that very night. "Just lick around the lesions," he said.

Remember the scene in that old black and white classic, *Heidi*, where sexual abuse survivor codependent tap dancing midget Shirley Temple tries to coax her evil step sister to walk out of her wheelchair? After all that cheerleading and prayers to God above, the little dark haired bitch huffs and puffs, takes one halting step then falls flat on her ass.

That's what I think of when I imagine the worried well trying to "help" me and my dilemma. If I want your help, I'll ask for it. In the meantime, keep your hand-wringing, nail-biting troubles to yourself. I don't want to be worrying about you. In fact, I don't want to be worrying about anything.



**Every six months or so, I see a sight that moves me deeply.**

**It's the sight of a patient, swaddled in blankets with Ray Bans and a baseball cap, being pushed in a wheelchair through the Castro for that one last look.**

ROBERT De ANDREIS

# I Just Had Unsafe Sex

JULY 21, 1993

**The cab driver knocked on the door and my friend just left. We didn't shake hands or hug. We smirked. I looked out the window as the cab drove away thinking, "What the hell did I just do?"**

Now that I think about it, we had unsafe sex the last time he was over too. It was so weird because he's the only person I've done this with in years. I'm disappointed with myself. Why didn't I stop?

I met him a year ago and we always have a very intense time. There is a strong physical attraction on both ends, no big deal. The last time he came over was about two months ago. Last night we were fooling around, and all of a sudden, he initiated something unsafe. It took me by surprise and I abruptly stopped.

Since safe sex I haven't screwed at all. Sure, I miss it, but I hate the way condoms feel. So I totally

stopped and got used to other things. I'm okay with that. Besides, it's so personal and so risky, I simply never do it.

But it caught me off guard. Suddenly all my safe sex guidelines went out the window. This one sly move was a spit in the face to the millions of dollars spent on safe sex education. What was he telling me? He's never asked me my status. I've never told him mine. Up until then, there was no reason to.

Last night, a sudden a bottle of poppers appeared on the bed. Oh no, I thought, I am equally repelled and attracted to the temptation, but I always hate the way I feel the next day - burnt nose, headaches, dizziness. It was like we were having a three-way with this little bottle. A part of me was outraged that he would bring it over - it was so intrusive and an open invitation to danger.

But no one grabbed it, it just kept rolling back and

forth. I knew what would have happened if I did - we would have continued to have unsafe sex. But I was never tempted. I passed and felt good it. He didn't do them either. When it was all over, I felt awkward having him around and couldn't wait for him to leave.

While we waited for the cab, he made small talk about his mother coming to visit. It made me sad. I started to dissociate - split off from my body. I saw him talking but couldn't hear the words. It felt like I was in a tunnel. I have been working so hard on being grounded these days. Then something like this happens and throws me off. Damn.

I am fully responsible for half of what went on here, and for my part, I was irresponsible. I don't know what was going on in his head, what his status is, or what he thinks mine is. I may look as healthy as a

horse, but I do have an AIDS diagnosis.

I wasn't stoned or drunk, he wasn't a stranger. I have condoms within reach. He initiated the unsafe part. I could have been stronger. I decided to write about this because it is real life. If you think I'm going to dish out bitchy one-liners week after week - think again. Laughter is an excellent immune booster, but so is honesty. All that clever crap is bullshit compared to this bottom line.

Scandalized? Look, "A Course in Miracles" says that wisdom is the relinquishment of judgment. So save those stones, wise guy. Besides, I'm reaching out to all my sexually active HIV buddies. I wrote this for us. A part of me loves all you guys, I know what we're going through.

Maybe I'm screwing myself over by disclosing something so heated, but I feel better already. If I've prevented one slip, or opened the eyes of someone

who is negative - then I've done my job. And for that reason I'm proud of what I did tonight - I wrote this article for you.



**I wasn't stoned or drunk, he wasn't a stranger. I have condoms within reach. He initiated the unsafe part. I could have been stronger. I decided to write about this because it is real life.**

ROBERT De ANDREIS

# A Cure is Nowhere in Sight

AUGUST 4, 1993

**I'm your basic AIDS existentialist, I've never been all tomb and gloom. If there is a tiny speck of light, I'll send out a search party. And if there's no light at all - I'll just plain party. But something is dawning on me, something I have been in full-blown denial about - HELP IS NOT ON THE WAY.**

Do you remember in the *Poseidon Adventure* when that huge ocean liner flipped upside down? Suddenly the survivors realized they would have to swim past their past - their rooms, deck chairs, and dance clubs - now in total chaos. When they finally got to the top they blow-torched their way to safety. A helicopter was waiting, the credits rolled, and you heard, "There's Got to be a Morning After."

Well, that's what AIDS feels like for me. It turned everything upside down. I look back at my past and it seems senseless in the wake. Sometimes it feels like I'm treading water just to get through the day. Other times it's false hopes and heartache.

But AIDS is not a crying game for me. I have a dream that I do get out alive. But I am alone - my friends are dead, my community destroyed. Unlike the movie, there is no chopper to take me home, no credits, no song. I've done everything possible yet there is no waiting cure to save my life.

Whatever wonderful things you say about spirituality, 12-step programs, morphine, loving family and friends - the truth is you have a terminal disease and you are going to die. To be in denial about your disease includes being in denial about death.

Long term survivors have a remarkable no-nonsense acceptance of their death sentence - thereby transmuting it year after year. Death is not like the weather - nobody talks about it but everybody does something about it.

Guess what? Hope is a four letter word. It keeps you out of the present - the most vital time in your life. Hope is wanting something you don't have, and think you need. Hope is a bunch of crap to keep you from the way life really is. Sure, I want a cure. But I'd rather be content with reality, than spend my last days

on Earth wishing for something I can't have.

Western medicine says, "A virus is the most difficult thing to kill." There still is no cure for the common cold, a much simpler virus - not like that bitchy mutating retro-virus, pussy whipping your t-cells into a slow, painful death. The writing's on the petrie dish, "Lab rats are dying of boredom waiting for that cure."

So what?! Shrug it off - do you have a choice? Playing hardball with death has packed a spiritual punch for me. WHAM! If everyone is doing everything possible then this is the way things are supposed to be - for now. God knows why.

Grabbing Death by the balls has freed me from false hopes and heartbreak. Once, I spent a whole year on a painful clinical trial that wrecked havoc with my body and why - so a drug company could entice new stockholders? I spent another year sick to my stomach, popping AZT and grinding DDI - feeling like Linda Blair in *The Exorcist*, spinning my head around spewing green bile - for what?!

Yet, I am drawn to the intrigue of the kingdom of the dead - a shadowy place

inhabited by shadows, it's my Scorpio dark side. If balance is essential for long term survival, then it's unrealistic to look only at the light - it's just half the story. For us nasty boys, sex=death, not in a pejorative way, but in a daredevil way - courting danger with desire. How many times have you flirted with death while having sex?

All that inner golden light is nothing more than pancake syrup if you ignore Death's tempting ploys to call you home. Sure, who doesn't like trying to pick up spiritually correct guys in Crystal Way on Market Street? But mostly, they turn out to be lesbians, don't they? If I've rattled your precious New Age nerves take two amethyst crystals, shove them up your ass, and call me in the morning.

Mississippi tragedy? Cry me a river. If we responded to the flood like we responded to AIDS, this whole continent would be underwater. Natural disasters are part of life, but AIDS is an unnatural disaster of biblical proportions - and even God hasn't come up with a vaccine. Yet.

But death and disease are partners in life - not partners in

crime. So healing from AIDS is not only possible, it's easier than you think. But healing is not a cure. And death is not a four letter word.



**Hope is a four letter word. It keeps you out of the present - the most vital time in your life. Hope is wanting something you don't have, and think you need. Hope is a bunch of crap to keep you from the way life really is.**

ROBERT De ANDREIS

# My Best Friend Just Tested Positive

AUGUST 11, 1993

Last night I got off the phone with my dearest friend. I can't believe it. There's nothing to say. I just listened. He tested positive! "Now, don't go writing an article about it," he said.

He wracked his brains - he's been hypersafe. I'm in total shock. For the most part, he's been carved out of a bar of soap. Sure, I've seen him on his knees at Mike's and Blow Buddies, but it's usually because he's praying for me.

It never occurred to me that he could test positive. As I listened to his flood of concerns I stared out the window. Under darkening skies, I watched the hypnotic red lights on Sutro Tower, so steady and calm, while I dissociated.

My eyes kept watering as I listened. For all I know about testing positive and the multitude of options available, I was speechless. "Now I'll never find a boyfriend," he said.

"Let me tell you a story. This afternoon, on my way to

the *Sentinel*, I noticed a sultry guy in a trance in Crown Books. I cruised him from the security mirrors, weaving through the isles like a snake in the grass.

He picked up Chopra's *Ageless Body, Timeless Mind* and combed his fingers through his hair. I brushed past him close enough to read his waist and length size. Then he disappeared. Finally, I nabbed him over a Snapple on a bench outside of Harvest. And our small talk got big fast.

Soon he was telling me his deepest existential revelations while I chewed a piece of gum pretending it was his tongue. We sat on the steps of Open Bible Church on Market Street and exchanged ideas about AIDS (we're sero-opposites), death and survivors guilt. Then he said, "When all this is over, I want to build a museum to the survivors, like the Holocaust."

"No," I said, "this is not the Holocaust, this is not a TV movie, this is AIDS. It's poetic injustice to imagine AIDS as some big operatic tragedy. Metaphors are the

last refuge of the poetically incorrect. Besides, why a museum? And what would you call it, the Museum of Modern Tarts?"

I said how I reached in my wallet, pulled out my number already folded on a piece of paper (do it, guys, you just never know). When I asked him for his, suddenly he had a lover and couldn't give it to me.

"What, doesn't he let you use the phone?" With that, I snatched my number from his hand. "Life's too short for the short end of the stick, pal. You better get going, you got some slippers to fetch," I could hear my friend snapping his fingers over the phone.

"Being positive means you don't have time for the married, newly divorced, freshly widowed, losers, loners, jerks, flakes, air heads, bums, co's, the worried-well, club whores, sex club tricks, park trade, sex slaves, sex pigs, phone freaks, street trash, and all the rest - your life is too valuable." Besides, that's my turf!

Actually, I didn't really say that smarmy line about fetching slipper, but it sounded good and my friend loved it because he knows I have a fatal attraction for married men. They sit you on a pedestal, blow you, then blow you off - and they can't cheat on you, can they?!

But we did exchange numbers - and directions to his house. I will always have a weakness for mysterious men - every one a gift from God's dark side. And what good's a gift if you can't open up the box? Sure, I saw photos of his lover on the refrigerator, and what did I think? At least it wasn't me!

He said he enjoyed me because I am positive and got off on my attitude about death and offered me some mystical insight. I felt secure, and slightly mischievous, falling asleep with him this afternoon. He made me feel safe - the safest sex of all. So welcome aboard, my friend. There are guys out there hoping they'll meet you because of your status. But you're not going to meet Mr. Sero Positive staying home

playing with your cat. Remember, anyone can test positive - the trick is staying that way.



Being positive means you don't have TIME for the married, divorced, widowed, losers, loners, jerks, flakes, the worried-well, club whores, sex club tricks, park trade, sex slaves, sex pigs, phone freaks, street trash, and all the rest - besides, that's my turf!

ROBERT De ANDREIS

# AIDS Cure From Gay Fetal Tissue

AUGUST 18, 1993

**A**fter I was diagnosed, I crawled into the fetal position and cried. I felt like a child as I wrung out my tissue. Then it dawned on me. Maybe long term survivors know how to survive the short term - just like children do.

A friend who just tested positive asked for my thoughts on surviving. I said don't listen to anyone but yourself. That's a skill we must relearn - it's stripped out early on. Sometimes "education" drowns out our inner voice - that internal mechanism that always knows best.

Another thing we lose is our center. Dancers know that term from training - it's what you must feel in order not to fall, it also helps you spin and jump. In healing terms, it's your equilibrium - that state of mind where you're grounded and comfortable with yourself. Many times losing your center is the first indication of trouble.

Rigid, linear thinking atrophies natural gifts that ease, delay or heal illness.

One gift is intuition. Try honoring a gut feeling over logic appearing otherwise. Have you ever heard someone say they had a real strong intuition but it turned out to be wrong? Never!

Also, cultural taboos around being selfish can do more harm than good. When you have an illness, being selfish is smart. Why care about how you look to others? Saving your appearance can cause your disappearance.

As adults, it's hard to yell out for what we need - and scream and cry until we get it. When we're sick, in pain, confused - do we kick and scream until someone helps us? We should if our life's at stake. Good manners take a back seat when your needs fall on deaf ears.

Can we laugh at death? Are we playful in the face of danger? Do small things delight and give us pleasure? Can we receive unconditional love? Recognized these traits yet? They are the traits of children who can access nature's immune defense system. Can you?

To survive childhood, nature equips young minds

with instinctual modes of response that have nothing to do with "thinking" - intuition, a sixth sense, selfish kicking and screaming until needs are met. These all seem like excellent survival skills to me.

Why would you need intuition with AIDS? Maybe you have an intuitive feeling about one type of treatment or doctor over another. At a time when Western medicine doesn't have all the answers, your gut feelings play the greatest role. Honor it. It could save your life.

If you aren't getting what you need - kick and scream until you do - whether it's medical attention or government funding. All the customary rules of gentility go out the window in times of war and terminal disease.

It doesn't take much to keep small children amused and fascinated with life - their curiosity is endless. Are you still wide-eyed and excited about the world? Or has cynicism extinguished your life force?

Do children fear sickness, death, disease, hatred, homophobia, cancer, racism, AIDS, decay, crime, violence,

evil, despair, depression? NO! Their minds are empty before we teach them that crap. Think about it.

What if we taught children that "sickness" does not exist. Instead, when the body changes and slows down, when you lose weight and go blind, when you can't eat or sleep, when you're drenched with fever, when there are sharp and dull pains everywhere - what if we taught that this is a SACRED time and means you are about to embrace the very soul of the Universe? At least it would be something to look forward to.

To survive AIDS, empty your head and put back only what makes sense to you. Lighten your backpack for that climb back home - take only what's necessary, leave nothing important out.

Keen mental awareness is crucial for AIDS survival, yet it can't be taught - only developed by trial, error and trust. And the biggest error is not trusting yourself above life's trials.



**I said don't listen to anyone but yourself. That's a skill we must relearn - it's stripped out early on. Sometimes "education" drowns out our inner voice - that internal mechanism that always knows best.**

ROBERT De ANDREIS



# Once in a Blue Moon

SEPTEMBER 1, 1993

**L**ast night by chance I ran into a ghost from my past that made me reflect on deeper levels of the AIDS epidemic. When we parted company twelve hours later, I felt drained and exhausted. But mostly I felt numb.

We tricked once ten years ago. I hadn't seen him since - except one time last year. When I first met him in the early eighties he was twenty, strong and gorgeous - with a disarming natural beauty and impenetrable aloofness. I was fascinated. But we never met again and I forgot all about him.

Last year, after getting PCP and quitting my job as a school teacher, I met him by chance. It was just a one shot deal again. He gave me his number but I fumbled. I called him but didn't know what to say. I wasn't working, it was disorienting. My new AIDS diagnosis drained my confidence and I felt out of place everywhere - especially around new people.

I wasn't prepared to talk with him about my diagnosis

and my recent unemployment. Teaching had filled up my life so completely that when it was pulled out from under me, there was a huge void. "What do you do with all your free time?" he asked. I got a lump in my throat.

I said nothing. I look back at those months of last year and still don't know how I got through them. My health came back but I didn't know what to do with myself. I got sick of family and friends telling me to volunteer or do something productive with my time.

Instead I became paralyzed. For the first time in my adult life, I had no focus. I wasn't ready to see myself as a PWA quite yet either. I would sit in my apartment for days with the blinds pulled down and the phone unplugged.

So last night, when I ran into this guy again, it was a sign post for me. In a year's time, I had rebuilt my life with new people, a new apartment and new work - I had recharged my batteries in a big way.

When I ran into him last night at three in the morning, I was shocked. In the past year, he had fallen over the edge - hustling, drugs, temporary

homelessness. I listened in disbelief. He had been one of a handful of mythic tricks from my past - curious men of captivating beauty that reappear in memory at random. But I really never knew a thing about him.

Still hot (and hot headed), I listened to his sordid tales of sex and drugs with an open heart. I forced myself to remain neutral and withhold judgment. He was not a tragedy, he was simply real. Maybe even too real.

Ten years of life's sharp edges were etched in his face. Yet I caught a glimpse of

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something exquisite last night. His aloofness was still in tact, oblivious to surrounding chaos and decay. His willful, turbulent self had strengthened over time, enhanced by detours he created for maximum learning.

In the morning light I could see it was drugs, not HIV, that aged him. I wanted to believe that if he somehow cleaned up his act he'd look twenty again. Spirits of the dead circled the room as I held him in my arms. He didn't feel like a hearty AIDS trooper. Maybe someone would tell me in a year or two that he recently died - and I would remember our three odd nights together and shrug.

I held him tight and kissed him with my heart. It felt like he might somehow dissolve in my arms and there was nothing I could do about it. Suddenly, in that moment of helplessness, I felt a wonderful peace surround us. It had nothing to do with myths, drugs, or disease. I looked in his clear eyes and saw a real person - whole and complete.

AIDS has accelerated all lessons of the spirit for me. Now, every moment on earth is

a chance to learn what I came here for - to love and be loved. The people I meet on the way are sign posts, guiding me to where I'm going and reminding me of where I've been.



# Snakes Are Fun, Except For The Venom

SEPTEMBER 22, 1993

**T**his was a bad AIDS week that turned me into a real bitch. I got some flu-like thing which kicked me in bed for a few days. When I get sick, everything looks like shit. I surrender to the healing process by sleeping it off for a few days.

Last year, my HIV benefits coordinator at Kaiser suggested I get a pet snake for company, not that I need more snakes in my life. Actually they make wonderful pets - quiet, sneaky, rat-eating - just like my ex, bless his HIV-filled heart.

Can I be frank? Cats are so seventies and give you toxoplasmosis. And I'm not dying for any pussy. Snakes eat mice. I buy them frozen and toss them in the microwave on feeding day.

Well, last week I noticed "Rex" was gone! I looked everywhere, and I mean everywhere. Yes, I even looked up there. My main

dilemma was how to tell my hot, jumpy roommate who sleeps on the floor in the living room. I decided to tell him right before bedtime. He went berserk with a million questions, "Did you look around your AIDS pills? Did you look in your AIDS file? Did you check under the seat cushion of the wheelchair?" Like most HIV negative guys, he's obsessed with my AIDS world. I wish he was as obsessed with doing the dishes.

The other day I finally met the lover of Bruce, this HIV-negative guy I had faux sex with all summer. You know the type: unemployable, slithery and would be really hot if he worked out. He finally invited me over, apparently mentioning to his lover I was positive. A dear mid-eighties Macy's table setting was laid out except for one thing. They gave me a paper plate to eat off.

Friday night I got a phone call from that bundle

of raw nerves, Troy from the Campus Theater. "Are you still writing for the B.A.R.?" he said, talking a mile-a-minute.

"No, it's the *Sentinel*, Troy, what do you want?" This time it was about some plucky pool party he was giving. You know the crowd - greasy, B-string porn wanna-bes, a thousand of Troy's most intimate friends. "It's at the Phoenix Hotel this Saturday," he said, "The Sisters of Chronic Fatigue Syndrome will be there with water guns filled with sunless tanning lotion. Guys from Falcon will demonstrate porn grooming tips - like using lube for hair gel, or cover-stick for speed bumps."

I'm pissed, not because he forgot to drop off a couple of free passes as promised, but because he had to throw in the part about proceeds going for AIDS. Yeah, right! Troy, I gave you your plug, now this is what I want: a full

accounting. You can't advertise about proceeds going for AIDS and then just throw in a few bucks. Finally, I was doing a long-term survivor interview on Saturday. In all fairness, he seemed like a nice guy. But something crooked on his wall caught my eye. It was a tastefully framed letter to the editor of the *Sentinel* - a letter written by him trashing me! He nervously laughed. I politely smiled, finished the interview, shook his hand and left.

But you don't see that interview anywhere in this paper, do ya' Blanche? To quote his sad letter, "What goes around, comes around." Besides, is it really possible to call yourself a long-term survivor - with your first hint of dementia? I'd get someone else to change your cat box, pal.

There is a God! While finishing up this article tonight, I heard a noise in the kitchen. By the garbage, looking for food,

was my darling Rex! Miracles do happen! But one more stunt like that, Rex, and I'll iron your sneaky ass into a belt. Same goes for you, Troy.



**My HIV benefits coordinator at Kaiser suggested I get a pet snake for company, not that I need more snakes in my life. Actually they make wonderful pets - quiet, sneaky, rat-eating - just like my ex.**

ROBERT De ANDREIS

# The Twelve Steps To Hell

SEPTEMBER 29, 1993

**T**here are support groups today for all that ails you. But addiction to these meetings can prevent you from ever recovering. They are filled with troubled souls who offer a dangerous substitute for professional help. When the blind lead the blind, someone usually falls on his ass.

Last year I became a psychological caregiver to a highly impressionable young man from the Midwest with a horrific story. He had multiple personalities due to satanic cult ritual abuse. I got so swept up in his story I forgot one thing. I have AIDS.

Eight years ago my friend started going to Alcoholics Anonymous, then Adult Children of Alcoholics, Al-Anon, and Co-dependency meetings. At each place, some member or sponsor would tell him he had deeper problems. Soon he ended up in a Sex and Love Addicts group, then to Incest Survivors and finally to Ritual Abuse Survivor meetings, where the stories

sometimes verged on the ludicrous.

His smitten gay therapist, using hypnotism and mind control techniques, diagnosed his mood swings as multiple personalities, and attributed it to alleged satanic cult ritual abuse. Abruptly, his therapist one day terminated with him so he turned to me to for support. It was a hellish year of frantic late-night phone calls and non-stop processing of his memories of unspeakable horror.

At first I was fascinated with my friend's story. Who wouldn't be? I bought books on the subject, went with him to ritual abuse support groups, met all his survivor friends. I became preoccupied with this material concerning the darkest corner of humanity. It was also a diversion tactic from focusing on my own AIDS.

My friends ran for cover. His brutal recollections of human sacrifice, torture, and childhood sexual abuse were too much for them. He swore me to secrecy. So when he'd tell me his memories night after night, I had no one to tell. Then he'd switch personalities in front of my eyes, from a

sweet four-year old alter into a raging, out of control madman - screaming, hissing, throwing things - I'd stand there dumbfounded.

I had never been involved in such complex psychological subterfuge. I had never had been around such an abusive character, it was not a pattern. I knew the relationship was deadly but I could hardly turn my back on someone so brutalized as a child. All I had was AIDS.

Then a miracle occurred. A series of articles ran last spring on False Memory Syndrome in the *Examiner* and *Vanity Fair*. He asked me to pour through all his journals from his past. Like Jungian detectives on a mission from the collective unconscious, we slowly untangled the puzzle. My friend had been horrible abused - by his therapist!

There was no cult. He wasn't a multiple. None of it really happened! He was a victim of False Memory Syndrome. To protect his fragile state, he stayed in a psychiatric hospital all summer to heal. Today, he is planning to sue his therapist. He's also working with and a local

journalist on a book deal.

The stress of this bizarre relationship has taken a toll on my health. All the while I kept thinking I could handle it. But with HIV, stress management means NOT trying to manage the stress in anyone else's life but your own.

A revelation happened today. He received a newsletter called *The Retractor* devoted to False Memory Syndrome. An article spoke about the serious impact on caregivers. Finally, he acknowledged that I had gone through hell too. He profusely apologized and hugged me. We both broke down and cried.

This summer was a healing time for me. I threw myself into a massive gardening project to clear my head. Also, writing for the *Sentinel* has been the first time I've seriously reflected on my own AIDS diagnosis, needs and limitations. I am not made of steel. I am not a therapist. I need to set boundaries. I need peace in my life.

Sometimes saying "no" to others is a sign of strength, not of weakness. When you embrace someone else's hell,

you always get burned. If support groups have been your saving grace, lucky you. But remember, the devil makes work for idle 12-step programs.



**I knew the relationship was deadly but I could hardly turn my back on someone so brutalized as a child. All I had was AIDS.**

# I Was A Teenage Sex Zombie

OCTOBER 20, 1993

**F**or years I had a secret life. When the sun went down and the moon went up, I'd transform from a sweet looking guy into a drooling sex wolf. I'd wander the city in a sex trace, stalking and preying on other creatures of the night. I had it down to a mad science and wouldn't come home until I made my killing. And now, it's killing me.

This month's *Vanity Fair* has an article, "A Night to Dismember" about every man's nightmare - that ballsy housewife who cut off her husband's dick, threw it out the window, and surgeons reattached it. Ouch! For years, during the blackest nights of my sexual addiction, I wished I could somehow unscrew my dick to keep me out

of trouble. But I couldn't and ended up getting screwed by my own dick night after night.

I could write the book on sex addiction, or maybe I should just read a few. Believe me, there's nothing hot about it.

Remember in *Roger Rabbit* when Jessica said, "I'm not bad, I'm just drawn that way." Well I always felt a similar circumstantial innocence about my addiction - that I was simply born in the cross fire of the sexual revolution and learned to shoot on sight - to protect myself from real intimacy. We trained ourselves to be servicemen for sex at a terrible cost to the community we were fighting to build. It was a revolution all right, with the dead bodies to prove it. I received a touching

letter from the mother of a gay son. She said my article, "I Just had Unsafe Sex" prompted her to have a serious talk with him. Lady, you can talk about unsafe sex until you're red in the face but unless you have one yourself, you'll never know what an asshole a dick can be.

Safe sex education blew it. The most underrated protection is not a condom, it's self control. The emphasis should be on the psychology that goes into wrestling with sex. How do we harness our primal instincts? How do we ignore all the triggering sexual images that bombard our community? Sometimes just seeing a hot Calvin ad or watching a sweaty jogger run by is enough to trigger an addict. They're the one's who should be educated -

most are HIV positive and still out there working it. Safe sex education should target the addict before he targets you.

Any gay man who contracted HIV after widespread testing became available illustrates the pull our dicks have over our lives. Recent sero-converts must have their heads spinning over their tragic news because it defies logic. Remember, your dick always pleads temporary insanity for foolish behavior - risking human lives for a momentary explosion of pleasure. But don't let your dick stand up to you. Just grab him by the balls and let him know who's boss.

If that doesn't work, get some help. To understand the nature of sexual obsession, and how

to develop healthy patterns of intimacy, join a support group or get counseling.

What have you got to lose beside the rest of your life?!



**I could write  
the book on  
sex addiction,  
or maybe I  
should just  
read a few.**

ROBERT De ANDREIS

# Try Treatments From Transylvania

OCTOBER 27, 1993

**H**alloween is the time to dress up and pretend to be something you're not - like those batty long-term survivors who think they're medical doctors. They stir up a witch's brew and fly off the handle when you question their quackery, then trash Western Medicine all the way to their cauldrons.

I just received the kind of phone call I hate. It was from a pushy reader insisting I run his long-term survivor story. When I said the series was on hiatus, he said he miraculously cured AIDS with his wacky life-extension formulas. He also had a partial manuscript of his life story he would be sending. Oh boy, I thought, this sounds scary.

I applaud anyone who takes a hands-on approach to his own healing - it's a co-creative process that involves a sensible balance of faith and hard-boiled science. Yet this caller implied he single-handedly

discovered the dangers of molds, yeast and candida. I suspect this misplaced energy was an indication of a mold and mildew problem in his subterranean laboratory. Then he proceed to outline the five times he mysteriously came back from near death - much like Frankenstein. "I'm not interested in that side of AIDS," I politely said. "I write about the spiritual, psychological and emotional impact of the disease. That's my job. I leave the rest to the pros. I'm not interested in all your life-saving lotions and potions."

His screeching voice was enough to drive bats out of hell. He trashed drug companies as profiteers pedaling poison. "Fine," I said, "the next time you get PCP, suck on a big Siberian Ginseng root ball - I'll be inhaling Pentamedine." I wonder, would he refuse a breakthrough vaccine courtesy of an evil Western drug company?

At the AIDS conference in Berlin, it was suggested that some long-term survivors have a genetic edge. No matter what they do, they're going to be around longer. But they think it's because of all the low-end vitamin cures they've concocted. Then they get on a big soap box to tell the world they've cure AIDS. But no one's listening, not even Oprah.

It's unethical to whip up emotional hysteria surrounding unconventional medicine. It's dangerous to swap treatment plans with amateurs who make wild claims. When I questioned his authority, he cited his own story as anecdotal evidence. Huh? Does that make you a qualified sex therapist just because you've been a whore?

The rush for the AIDS cure is a big brass ring worldwide, led by the best and brightest minds. Too often the scramble for the quick fix is a way of avoiding doing the real job

only you can do. Let the medical world do its job. Your job is to stay centered, say a few prayers, and crack a few jokes.

Western research is filled with gay and lesbians, too, who's friends and lovers have died of AIDS. When you demonize doctors you turn yourself into a mad scientist, digging up wild mushrooms in graveyards for a desperate cure. Let's not frighten each other with ghoulish solutions. Right now, somewhere on earth, the medical answers to AIDS exists. The professionals who will discover this are alive today, racking their brains. But your job is not to eat their brains, brew up potions, or sew heads back on corpses.

Long-term survivor stories serve us best when they share their valuable coping skills. I even found today's caller inspiring because of his faith in his convictions. Still, one of the few natural anti-virals is simply garlic,

and it's not just for vampires anymore. Maybe that's why the only true blood-sucking long-term survivor is Dracula, who's been around for centuries. Sure, I'd be interested to learn how he does he - that's quite a story indeed. But I wouldn't let him anywhere near my dick with those fangs of his.



ROBERT De ANDREIS

# They Came From Planet Vulva

NOVEMBER 3, 1993

**I** just finished flipping through John Gray's fascinating new book, *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* which speaks of distinct differences between the sexes. Imagine that?

He fails to mention that gay men must be from Uranus and gay women from planet Vulva, home of the Lesbian Avengers.

I used to know a ton of lesbians, now I only know one and even she's not too crazy about me these days ever since I made some scathing sexist joke at a party recently. Admittedly, it was tasteless, but hilarious and terribly politically incorrect - the best kind, wouldn't you say?

There seems to be a minor controversy brewing concerning the emergence of a new political fringe group, the Lesbian Avengers, who have somehow twisted sexual politics with sound business practices. They want equal entitlement to the health care resources that are used for AIDS to be used for breast

cancer research - in a tit for tat fashion.

Ladies, please! Nobody gave us a goddamn dime to fight AIDS years ago. We begged, borrowed and stole that money early on. We fought hard with lobbying efforts, grassroots tenacity, and our lives to get the awareness and financial commitment to where it is today.

The same goes for the Castro. This neighborhood was not funded by some politically correct, sexual orientation land development deal. The Castro grew out of sound business practices over a generation where only the strong survive. The neighborhood has seen a multitude of business come and go dictated by supply and demand - gender-based entitlement has nothing to do with it.

I've worked in the service industry and I'm going to say what everybody knows - lesbians can be horrible tippers, and tight with the dollar. They'll sit in a busy restaurant and nurse a cup

tea all night during your dinner rush and stiff you on the tip. Sound familiar? Women, remember: money talks, bullshit walks. Reach into your pockets and you'll have all the shops and bars you want. We welcome that - it's good business for all of us.

It's ideologically incorrect to improperly associate AIDS, AIDS money, AIDS health care issue with gay men alone. We don't own that disease, it is not a gender-bias issue. Should more money be spent on educating lesbians on the transmission of AIDS? In a perfect world, yes - but the rule of thumb on scarce resources is to use it where it will do the most good. There's nothing fair about limited funds.

I was originally going to do a trash piece called, "Don't Cry For Me Marge and Tina" concerning the lesbian response to AIDS. But I harbor no ill will towards lesbians, why on earth would I? What is the gay man's response to breast

cancer? Why do straight men respond to lesbian pornography? Is it politically incorrect to have interracial sexual fantasies with the thought police? Our so-called progressive political agenda has become a poorly hidden agenda for greed, serving no one but the shrillest bullies.

In a political commentary last week for the *Sentinel*, a writer wrote, "To my lesbian sister: You are wonderful! I love you and thanks for being there for us." Sounds like that triple sincerity bullshit I used to sound like while tweaking on blow, know what I mean? Statements like that have pap smeared all over it. I am occasionally fascinated with the lesbian creature, but mostly I am indifferent. Did I just step on anyone's Birkenstock's?

Lesbian Avengers don't really come from Planet Vulva, they come from families like yours and mine. I don't profess to understand their uniquely defined culture or courtship rituals.

Many gay men prefer to trash gay women for some peculiar, antiquated reason. Yet they remain a mystery to me, one that I respect yet have little interest in solving right now. But gals, just keep your grubby claws off of my AIDS money.



**I was originally going to do a trash piece called, "Don't Cry For Me Marge and Tina" concerning the lesbian response to AIDS. But I harbor no ill will towards lesbians, why on earth would I?**

ROBERT De ANDREIS

# Patsy Cline Gives Me Heartburn

NOVEMBER 10, 1993

**M**y broken hearted tale is so pathetic, Patsy Cline sings about it from heaven. His love went from "Walking After Midnight" to "Stalking after Recess" in five years. After we tested positive, he walked right out that door - for an HIV shotgun wedding with jailbait.

After we broke up, I felt crazy for feeling so lonely and blue. I didn't want him back, but how I missed those loving arms. Our five years together should have never lasted more than five minutes. We were both gift wrapped damaged goods. He was a prize all right - a booby prize.

Prickly folks could never understand why such a stud would be sweethearts with a lanky cowpoke like me. He was a husky dark-haired dude, like Patsy herself, who turned heads like crazy. But what turned his head drove me crazy. He liked them young - real young. When I finally realized what he saw in my boyish looks, I fell to pieces.

ROBERT De ANDREIS

As a young boy, I was stalked by pedophiles in playgrounds, approached by a child pornographer and worse, I was raped one crazy day. I'm over all that now, but still have a deep revulsion for man-boy love stories. To learn that my darlin' had this very tendency just broke my heart. But he had reasons for his roving eyes.

He also had been molested as a young boy, but took the low road and forever identified with his perpetrator. I role-reversed the abuse and forever denied my passive side. I survived it alone, without any child psychologist's shoulder to cry on. Did this turn me into a bucking bronco, ropes and all?

He always joked, "When you turn thirty, I'm trading you in for two fifteen year olds." I never laughed, and he wasn't joking. After we tested positive he was like a stranger in my arms. The emotional support I'd hoped for unraveled like a dime store novel. He left me for a boyish nineteen year old.

I was heartsick. Who was that masked man and why did he bail? Weren't we

sweethearts forever? Didn't his new flame know about his HIV status? No, it turned out, he didn't. Instead my ex cut me out of his new life, fearing I'd tell his secret. So he

we know how deadly dysfunction can be. Chronic upset, abusive lovers and battering roommates can shorten your life in a snap.

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## Patsy Cline, Queen of the Codependants, kills me with her sentimental odes to dysfunctional love

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loaded up the kid and disappeared into the night - after they both just tested positive. Imagine that.

Torch singin' cowgirls cause the blues. Patsy Cline, Queen of the Codependants, kills me with her sentimental odes to dysfunctional love, a painful immune suppressant. But I'm over Patsy. Now when she croons, I think of all those lonesome losers who held me tight, promised me the stars, but mooned me instead.

Patsy's generation wasn't in touch with basic recovery issues. But with one-third of our community in some form of recovery - or in need of it -

Being single saved my life. Splitting up was so painful but staying would have been deadly.

Why do Patsy's sad songs still haunt us? Because they romanticizes our tragic man troubles: "A Stranger in My Arms," "Someday You'll Want Me to Want You," "The Heart You Break May Be Your Own," "I Fall to Pieces," and "I Love You So Much it Hurts." Oh, Patsy - get a life.

Tragically, Patsy died in a plane crash at age thirty. Had she lived, she may have worked all this stuff out: "It's Not Okay To Treat Me This Way," "From Counseling to

the Courthouse to the Al-Anon Waltz," "I Meet Mr. Right at a Co-da Meeting Last Night," or "I'm Setting Boundaries With the Man I Love."

Finding happiness is helped by healing our past. I talk so openly today because I've felt all the pain and forgiven those who've hurt me. I stay in the present and never sentimentalize my past - there are no pictures of anyone in my home. I have no bitter feelings about my past, I'm just happy to be alive.

Darlin', if you're still alive out there remember: even Patsy says that lovers never can be friends. Although her songs trick me into believing I'm still carrying a torch, I think I'm finally over you. In fact, I never want to see you again. Still, "I'll be loving you, always..."



# Phone Sex Addict Tells All!

NOVEMBER 17, 1993

**P**hone sex can be the answer to your prayers - especially if you've been on your knees for awhile. It's perfectly safe despite your pig mouth's big promises. And remember, it's never too late for true confessions.

My folks live in the city and like my articles - the ones I show them. My dad was having lunch in the Castro and picked up a *Sentinel* and read "I Was a Teenage Sex Zombie." He was amused but not surprised - he once helped me decide on the best treatment for my sex addiction, it's no family secret.

976 phone sex lines have been around for a decade. In the beginning, it was a safe alternative to sex during those years when AIDS transmission was still a mystery. One thing was sure - you couldn't get it from a phone receiver - unless, of course, you shared it as a sex toy.

I was such a regular, I could recognize former tricks by their first hello, and hang up accordingly - CLICK! I'd reject callers for the silliest reasons, by the sound of their voice, or the color of their hair: "Hi, I'm a buffed blonde dude with - CLICK!" I'd make up my own sleazy dictation: "HT HRY LAT/ITAL N2 GV BJ." Thanks guys, I miss you all. While the data is out on oral transmission of HIV, the sad truth remains - all the best cocksuckers are dead.

I'd leave groceries melting in the hallway to run towards my ringing phone. My friends stopped calling because they could never get through. I'd wake up in the middle of the night, lure someone over, and have no recollection of it the next day. Then I started meeting guys tweaked at the crack of dawn.

I shudder to recall one dark night. While asleep, the phone rang and a

mystery caller said someone gave him my number. He said he got off by coming into darkened, unlocked apartments. So I gave him my address. Later, my heart pounded when I heard the door click then slow footsteps down the darkened hallway. It was straight out of that noir classic, *Sorry, Wrong Number*.

The emotional impact of having HIV can spin you out of control. High levels of numbing sexual activity deflect deep painful emotional issues going on inside. The likelihood of unsafe sex increases with each partner. Sex addiction and HIV are a deadly mix and talking about it can save your life. A reader last week commented that he liked my honesty in writing about secrets we share. Thanks, but that doesn't sit well with me. Secrets are an emotional toxin that can rot away at your core - I try not to have any. As HIV positive gay

men, we've had our fill. I don't share them because I don't have them anymore.

Sometimes more damage is done by not being open. I thought I knew everything about my squeaky clean recovering Catholic friend until I saw him splayed out on a video jacket for gay porn! At first I was hurt he never told me. But when we talked, he broke down and said he had always needed to tell somebody.

I may have been raised Catholic, but I was born gay and have never felt guilty about my sexuality. I always liked Confession: you kneel in a dark booth and tell a stranger your secrets - and end up feeling good about it. If religion is a primitive form of psychology then Catholics know how therapeutic disclosure can be.

Disclosing your truth - your HIV status, your lifestyle, your feelings on homophobic remarks made during this holiday season can make you feel better.

It's time to open up and tell your family all. Protecting them from the truth is an attack on your integrity. And if you're not going to see them in person, you can always use the phone.



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ROBERT DE ANDREIS



# I Married The Missing Link

NOVEMBER 24, 1993

**The decline and fall of mankind ended when Neanderthal Man learned to stand erect. But what happened to the missing link between the Ice Age and the New Age? And why did I have to marry him?**

Two weeks ago I received a phone call that stopped me cold. It was from my ex lover saying he was in town! He had been living in icy Chicago the past few years and was here on business.

Of all weeks to return! I hope he didn't read that trash I wrote about him, which was still in the racks. What if he was coming to blow my head off? At least I wouldn't be dying of AIDS.

He picked me up on his big Honda Gold Wing, looking as fit as ever, and took me for breakfast. It was like Shakti Gawain's *Creative Visualization* gone bonkers. Did I manifest him out of the blue? "Yep,

you conjured me up, hon," he said, knowing what a bad witch I could be.

In the restaurant, I kept eyeing the stack of *Sentinels*. The waiter poured more coffee. I couldn't stand the suspense. I grabbed a paper and said, "This is what I'm doing with myself these days. You picked a doozie of a weekend to return."

I sat there frozen, waiting for him to throw coffee in my face. I had written some heavy stuff about our private lives, thinking I'd never see him again. Oops! He spit out his coffee and laughed.

"It's a great story," he said, "but it's not true." I nervously laughed, caught in a sin of omission. Of course that wasn't the full story, Blanche. I failed to mention the other reasons he left me - I was an out-of-control, sex addicted, bipolar bitch. More coffee, anyone?

I wrote that he and his new lover tested positive

and disappeared. This was wishful thinking. They actually left town to kick drugs and it almost worked. The real story reads more like Darwin's *Denial of the Fittest*.

"Did you guys both test positive?" I asked.

"No."

"Did you ever tell him you're positive?"

"No."

"Have you gotten a t-cell count in the past five years?"

"No."

"Do you have health insurance?"

"No."

"Do you have friends in Chicago with HIV?"

"No."

"Do you guys have any friends at all?"

"No."

He was knee-deep in no-man's land; so cocky and cavalier about his HIV denial, I had to bite my bitter tongue. If I wasn't careful we'd be fighting like the old days.

Fitness is his life so sickness terrifies him along with any discussions of AIDS. Sometimes big boys can be big babies. "When I get sick," he explained, "I'll just shoot myself or have my folks pull the plug. "Have they signed a legal directive to that effect?"

"No, parents don't need one, they can just come into your room and do it." Suddenly he was unfrozen cave man lawyer.

His plans for long-term survival included working out, drinking protein, and keeping a few bullets nearby in case of high fever. When we first lived together, I made him take his guns off the wall. Today, the only thing off the wall is his treatment plan. That's how he's surviving - by ignoring it.

That night, we cooked a few slabs of beef and rented Joan Crawford in *Trog*. Later, we slept together but didn't have sex. Quite frankly, his stubborn HIV denial turned me off. HIV

has transformed almost everyone I know, except him. I was irritated by his surprise visit and his ignorance disturbed me.

As AIDS unravels our future, links from the past appear only to vanish again without a trace. All the lives that might have been, will never be. The next day he gave me a hug, hopped on his bike, and drove back to the land that time forgot. It may be the last time I ever see him alive.



ROBERT DE ANDREIS

# The Ghost of Christmas Past

DECEMBER 8, 1993

**A**h, winter - the time of year when the wind howls through your drafty flat and rattles your bones. Grab those bronzers because from here on out you're turning nothing but pale. Unless, of course, you're already turning in your grave.

Why have several of my friends died of AIDS in the dead of winter? Maybe it's a holiday spite. So don't give sick friends droopy potted Christmas trees. They shiver on windowsills, shedding needles in deathbeds.

I remember visiting my friend Alan as he lay dying in Garden Sullivan Home. Suddenly there were Christmas decorations everywhere - and Alan was Jewish! Poor guy, what a tacky way to go, bombarded by all those gentile jingles.

Before Brett died a few weeks after Christmas, his lover decided not to do a tree that year - thank God. It was bad enough having

Brett's frazzled mother visit from New Jersey. She baked batch after batch of holiday cookies to stuff her grief. To this day gingerbread men make me sad.

My friend Pepe died in his living room on New Year's Day. His lover Dexter struggled through the holidays with a grim upper lip, weathering the worst of it. As Pepe lay dying in his rented hospital bed Dex took me aside and whispered, "What should I get him for Christmas?"

Are your holidays dry and itchy, filled with sad thoughts of Christmas past? The brutality of winter stirs an icy chill in the air when you wake up in the middle of the night with chattering teeth - and racing thoughts.

But sometimes Christmas can be so Devine. Remember in "Female Trouble" when she didn't get her cha cha heels? She was so furious she yanked that tree down while her mother sang "Silent Night."

Is it beginning to look alot like Christmas?

romance. Two guys meet at a Halloween ball, become

**Two guys meet at a Halloween ball, become lifetime lovers by Christmas, and meet each other's friends on New Year's Eve - anything to get through the holidays.**

Let's face it, Santa's a fat, old pedophile drunk - red nose and all. Kids sit on his lap then he slides down their chimney. Once I asked him, "Why does Mister Rogers act like a mentally challenged person of the retarded persuasion?" He said because we trust the low functioning.

Okay, okay, I confess. I go through seasonal depression every winter. It improves with time since I first identified it a few years ago. Sometimes I take anti-depressants, other times I get stonned, take hot baths and stay out of cold, damp parks at night.

Along with false cheer comes false holiday

lifetime lovers by Christmas, and meet each other's friends on New Year's Eve - anything to get through the holidays. But the honeymoon's usually over by Valentine's Day.

This Thanksgiving, I took my friend Vince over to my family's for diner because he's part of my gay family. When you bring your gay pals over for the holidays, it can make the experience a richer one for you. We went around the table to say what we we're thankful for. My sister, Kristen, announced she's thankful because she's expecting her first child this June! My baby sister's pregnant! Vinnie and I burst

into tears and couldn't hug Kris tight enough! It was a Kodak moment.

If you numb yourself from pain, you can't feel real joy. With a new bundle on the way, the dread of winter holds a special promise. My God, let me live long enough to see if this kid's got the gay gene! That's it - I'm doing a tree this year!



ROBERT De ANDREIS

# There's No Place Like Home

DECEMBER 15, 1993

**E**xcuse me for not having a dysfunctional family. Sure, my mother feels uncomfortable about some of the lurid topics I've been covering. But the only deep, dark, most shameful family secret I have is that she owns a Chihuahua.

My family has lived in San Francisco for over a hundred years. My mother used to go to the Castro theater when she was a little girl in the 40s, when this was a sleepy Irish neighborhood. When I came out, I had to stay and face the music. Native San Franciscans don't run away from home.

What straight couple ever expects to have a gay son? We're a functional family now because we've worked hard at it over the years. But recently, my mother's been wondering why I decided to use my real name at the *Sentinel*.

I love my independent mountain mom, fascinated with stories of pioneer women and Kate Heburn. She's a former P.E. teacher and softball coach who likes tomboys more than sissies. I

got that from her. She's also a "gay sensitive" local high school counselor. She got that from me.

Last month, she invited me up to my parent's cabin outside Nevada City in the Sierra foothills - and her little dog too, much to my repulsion. On the way to the mountains she relayed a story of how a lesbian from CUAV (Community United Against Violence) speaker's bureau came to talk to her Family Life class.

But this aggressive speaker kept pushing her own lesbian parenting agenda. When my mother told her to stay on the assigned topic, a nasty fight broke out. And nobody wins a fight with my mother.

We drove past Auburn and were almost there but the silence was killing me. "Look," I blurted out, "I don't care what kind of mother you think this woman would be. Those comments sounded homophobic. I need to set a boundary or I'm calling my sponsor."

"Besides," I added, "the American Psychological Association supported a lesbian in a recent custody case. The latest study on

lesbian mothers shows they score significantly higher than do heterosexuals on the Parent Awareness Skills Survey, according to a recent article in the *S.F. Chronicle*.

We passed a deer crossing sign. From behind the wheel of the van, my dad floored the gas and changed the subject. He asked me what I was writing about that week. "Uh, well, it's about phone sex," I said. He was all ears but my mom and her little dog were starting to squirm.

Just then a deer ran into the road! My dad slammed on the brakes! The dog flew back, like a rat with wings, heading for the open window! I swooped down and grabbed it. But I'm working through my codependent rescue issues and this violated a contract with myself. Now I'll have to call my sponsor.

My mother cut me off and said phone sex sounded like immature behavior to her. She added that she didn't consider my articles in the *Sentinel* to be exactly "top-notch journalism." Ooof! Punched by own mother!

We stopped for gas and stretched our legs. I called

my sponsor. My mother thought I was having phone sex and hurried back into the van. We started to drive off. I looked out the window and noticed her little dog was left stranded at the station. It ran towards us. I rolled up the window and prayed for vultures.

I'm lucky I have progressive folks. Lately, I've been hearing horror stories about parents from hell. Even gay-proud parents go through P-FLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) burnout when their son has AIDS. All those years of parade marching can turn to finger pointing and back turning. Some families say they accept your gay life but when you die they swoop down like vultures, grab the body and run. Your dead friend's will is contested, your caregiving is forgotten, and you get stuck holding the IV bag.

Homophobia begins at home and that's where it should end. If you can't get your own family to accept homosexuality, before and after you die, you didn't do your homework. Talk to your family and face the

music. It's time to stop running away from home.

Tell them: "I'm grateful for all the love and support you've given me during these AIDS years, but don't you dare say I died of anything but AIDS. If you really accept my homosexuality, I want you to honor it in my memory."



**T**alk to  
your family  
and face the  
music. It's  
time to stop  
running  
away from  
home.

# That's What Friends Are For

DECEMBER 22, 1993

**R**eaders, I need your holiday help for my old friend Dexter who took care of his lover until the day he died. But these days, all of their mutual friends stopped calling, leaving Dexter nothing but grief in his hour of need.

It was hard for Dexter to let go of his job as an 18 wheeler rock and roll truck driver. I'd get sad phone calls from him calling from a hotel room somewhere on the road. After his lover died, there was no one keeping the home fires burning. "Get off the road," I'd tell him, "It's time to retire, it's time to come home."

He sent me the keys to his apartment. I packed everything in boxes and put them in storage. Once he called me with news of a persistent cold. He went to a clinic in one city, while the tour moved on. He called the clinic back and had them fax a prescription to a new local. If it didn't arrive in time, he'd have to tell the hotel clerk to forward it to the next city on the tour.

Sometimes, I'd get a panic phone call from him and he'd describe a symptom over the

phone. We'd try to figure out what it was, then I'd Federal Express some drugs to him, maybe Myclex Troche for thrush or my Megace tablets for appetite.

Dexter is the only gay boy trucker in the rock and roll trucking business, closeted for survival, not by choice. No one knew he had AIDS, either. Hiding this and not seeking proper treatment landed him in the hospital a few months ago with phenomena.

All kinds of heroes and rescuers appear at hospital bedsides. His longtime wealthy friend Phil offered him a trailer to sleep in when he got out. Phil owns a huge ranch, and several empty homes. Gee thanks, Phil.

His other friend, a middle aged man who had been his lover for a couple of years in the seventies, came through in a big manic whirlwind of generosity. Dexter could stay in his beautiful home and he would be his caregiver.

Phil called me a few weeks ago before he left for the Far East. We agreed. Dexter's friend has a prickly personality. It was the best he could come up with on such

short notice. But caregiving is not as easy as it looks.

It's not just a matter of having a new overnight guest. The AIDS patient has a whole specific set of needs. Unless the caregiver is trained or intuitively sensitive, nasty situations occur. Dexter's roommate was not fully equipped to handle the emotional requirements of the job.

Dex is an independent guy in good spirits. But every time we get together, I see the emotional toll in his big blue eyes. His roommate has erratic mood swings that range from syrupy sweet home-cookin' mom style caregiving, to hostile, petty, explosive, cruel, bullying, taunting, condescending, teasing, mean spirited behavior.

When Dex's lover died, he left him enough life insurance for Dex to buy a spiffy, classic Porsche which he is not ready to part with. He needs a new place to live, a beautiful home with a protected place to park his car. He's able to pay a few hundred bucks for a nice room with warm people.

These days he's totally drained. I've seen this happen before. The AIDS patient

shrivels up and dies under the erratic moods of a caregiver, who's heart may be in the right place, but who doesn't have the tools for the job.

Dexter doesn't need a caregiver, he's back in good health. He needs a safe, caring place to live. Just because someone is a family member or friend and available for the job, doesn't mean that person can be there in a way that best suits the patient.

Something frightening happens to a caregiver who's not prepared for the enormous emotional task that lies ahead. Hidden fears and resentments come out and take the form of twisted hostility as in that ode to diabolical caregiving, *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*

Dex's roommate is exhibiting all the classic signs of this phenomena. He's reluctant to get assistance, he won't take a class or read a book on AIDS caregiving. There's a skill to it. Not everyone can do it. Having an extra room doesn't qualify you either.

I'd do anything for my friends. Dex has been there for me over the years and he has grown incredibly so as a person because of AIDS. If

you know of a situation for him that would be appropriate, call me and leave a message for me on the writer's voice mail at the *Sentinel*.

Five years ago, after testing positive, my lover left me high and dry with our apartment. I called AIDS Project L.A. and got a roommate with AIDS from their listings. He lived with me until the day he felt it was time to move into a hospice. The experience forever enriched my life.

Dexter fulfilled his lover's last request. The last time the AIDS quilt would ever be assembled in its entirety, for March on Washington, it had a new addition. Dex and I rented a sewing machine and struggled to use it. Although it's not as easy as it looks, the project kept us in stitches.

ROBERT DE ANDREIS

# It's My Party and I'll Lie if I Want To

DECEMBER 29, 1993

**Something happened at a holiday party last night that really pissed me off. But the results surprised me. For once, I became an unlikely safer sex advocate with a friend of mine. Maybe this will set the tone for the New Year.**

I took my hot friend Joey over to my friend Jeff's house for a low key holiday party filled with a few nice guys from work. Joey kept twitching and fussing because he wanted to go to the infamous Winter Solstice sex orgy party.

Joey is in the throws of sexual recovery, like myself, and I knew what was about to unfold. The very idea that a party of this kind was going on triggered him into obsessing about it, despite the warm and friendly crowd in front of us. And Joey is HIV negative.

As much as I could relate to his sex addict urges, something came over me. For

the first time, I set a sex boundary with him. "No, Joey, I am not going to drive you to that party. If you want to go, get there yourself. I won't be any part of an accomplice in this. Also, I don't want to hear all about it tomorrow."

I have found that gay friends can become unwitting accomplices in sex activities just by listening. Sure, we need to talk to our friends about the things we do, but in a healthy way. Are we honest about the level of safety involved? Or are we simply trying to trigger our friends into equally addictive behavior? When Joey talks to me about his tricking, I'll stop him if it's starting to sound sexually triggering for me. But if he's telling me about what happened with some guy, I'll make sure to support him in his efforts to play safer.

Then Tony walked into the party. Jeff and Tony are good friends, in fact, Jeff has told me plenty about Tony that maybe I had no business knowing. Tony is a

long time sex addict, who's been sexually active for years. He's also been HIV positive for nine years. When Tony saw Joey, sparks flew and suddenly Tony forgot we were at Jeff's swanky sweater party skewing little weenies with toothpicks.

He sat in on the middle of my conversation with Joey and started making fun of me for advocating sexual safety. "What, are you going to stand on a soap box and tell all your friends to stop having sex?" he said.

"No, Tony, I'm just reminding my friend about the increased risks of going to an orgy, where the players are more likely to be HIV positive. He is the last friend I have who is HIV negative. I would be furious if he contracted HIV because of one lapsed moment of judgment."

Then Tony said he was tired about talking about AIDS. "Besides," he said, "I've never been tested." What an outrageous lie! On top of that, he said he hadn't

been to a certain sex place in years. Joey and I both saw him there last month! Then he told Joey that he wanted to screw him, despite knowing his HIV negative status. Nice guy, huh?

What the hell is going on here? I'm tired of gay men infecting each other, when we know better. Why is this still happening, why, why, why?

The story of AIDS prevention is in the retelling, again and again and again. If there's a whole new infection rate among younger gay men, something is not working. When it comes to AIDS, maybe it's time to be more codependent and less self-centered. Reach out and help your HIV negative friends stay that way, for God's sake. Do what you can to support them, even if it seems to be too much. This is a life and death epidemic, who's containment is within our reach.

The alcohol and drug recovery support group model doesn't always work

for AIDS. If you slip and have a drink, you go to a meeting and start all over. But with AIDS, you make one wrong move and you pay for it with your life. What you can do to stop the spread? The AIDS new infection rate is blood on our own hands. Think about it.



**I'm tired of gay men infecting each other, when we know better. Why is this still happening, why!, why!, why!?**

ROBERT DE ANDREIS

# Alternative Medicine Won't Cure AIDS

JANUARY 12, 1994

**L**ately I've been run down with a condition that is common with AIDS. But don't insult me by telling me all the things I'm doing wrong.

The last time I wrote about my illness, I received hate mail for following my doctor's advice. But I suppose everybody's got their two cents worth - especially me.

Of course, those letters came from alternative medicine and New Age practioneers. It seems they are always right, and Western Medicine always sucks, until they get a serious illness, then you never hear from them again because conventional medicine saved their life and they're too sheepish to tell you.

I've seen a certain cockiness take over asymptomatic individuals

who first test positive. They read a few books on Eastern medicine and suddenly they're experts. But some people will grab at straws, brew them up and drink it, just to feel in control of a disease for which there is no cure. Can you blame them?

Unless you've got the medical studies and facts to back it up, I couldn't care less about all your "eye of the newt" ancient recipies. Grant it, some alternative medicines work just fine for the lower end of the medical spectrum, but not for something as critical as a killer retrovirus (or for a transgender operation, for all you parade committee babes out there.)

But made-for-tv-movie writer and AIDS heretic Professor Peter Duesberg doesn't believe HIV causes AIDS, according to his interview in *Spin Magazine*, not exactly the New England Journal of Medicine. In times of crisis, hustlers crawl out of the woodwork to tell people what they want to hear, in such a convinving way you are certain it's true, unless, of course, you know better.

It would be one thing if there was some treatment proposed that had a proven track record. But he offers nothing but theory, and magazine subscriptions to *Spin*. Is this helpful information for those with HIV - or more blather to spin our wheels on?

Some praise Duseberg theory as if it's real medicine and not just wild speculation. All of this functions best as another outlet for denial. It's hard to make that final acceptance of your own mortality - your one true job! - and much easier to get distracted by some something that sounds outlandish.

Alternative medicine works systemically for balancing out certain forces in the body and the mind. It works for minor ailments here and there, but it's nothing but a bunch of junkyard weeds when it comes to AIDS. What are you going to do if you start going blind from CMV - rub licorice roots on your eyeballs?

I know former *Sentinel* typist Charles Caufield thinks he single-handly invented the DNCB treatment he is pushing around town. DNCB is a caustic photographic chemical that you apply to your skin (if you're a masochistic fool) until it BURNS! The burn supposedly creates an immune response. Well, I was writing about DNCB in an L.A. AIDS Products Buyer's Club newsletter SIX years ago, and you know what happened to all the participants in that experiment? They died! 47,000 American thus far have died of AIDS. In those numbers count the very wealthy who received the best

treatments money can buy, healthy woman and children who never used drugs or had unprotected anal sex, hot hunky bodybuilders who never used recreational drugs, and doctors and alternative medicine practiontioners who died trying everything in their bag of tricks. If Duseberg doesn't believe those 47,000 Americans died of AIDS, what did they die of - bad thoughts?

If you listen to the Louise Hay Science of Mind types, they will say that illness is a thought and a thought can be changed. I don't care what feeble flimsy thought structure people hang on to in order to deny their real terror over their illness - just keep it to yourself.

The thing that bugs me about alternative practioneers is their need to drag others into their odd world. What ever the reason for their continued health, it's most likely genetics, according to last years AIDS conference in Berlin. But they think it's all the magic healing crystals they've shoved up their ass. Which is fine and dandy - until they get sick and die too.

I talk, not out of ignorance, but from experience. I've studied all this stuff at different times in my life. But since I've started to get ill, after five years of asymptomatic living, most of it seems limited. I am grateful I am no longer

devoted to someone else's spiritual program or health regime. I am finally clear headed about accepting death, which you can't always do with a Marianne Williamson tape talking at you a mile a minute. I am sure every one of those 47,000 Americans thought he or she wasn't going to get sick either, holding out for that magic bullet that never comes. But Western medicine won't cure AIDS either, at least not within my lifetime. AIDS or no AIDS, everyone bites the dust - excuse me - make that bites the transition - it's just a matter of time.



ROBERT De ANDREIS

# Are You Afraid of Being Buried Alive?

JANUARY 19, 1994

**W**hat's the big deal about dying?

**Everybody does it, right? People may be spooked by death for all kinds of foolish reasons but quite frankly, I'm not. In fact, I can't wait to get off this lousy planet.**

The other night I woke up in the middle of the night thinking that I'd soon be dead and end up in a coffin BURIED ALIVE! I know it's absurd but there I was, tossing and turning, imagining I was stuck in a dark box - alive - for eternity. The next day I realized what this was all about. I've been struggling with my illness for a few months and sometimes it feels as if I've already buried myself alive. Maybe I've dug my own grave prematurely and missed out on some fun times left to be. Maybe not, I'm tired of fun times.

I never worry about death because I don't worry about most things. But lately this whole planet seems twisted. Everyday I read about sick things mankind does to itself.

Some days I can't wait to leave this place. I've had my fun, I've done my work. Everything I've been asked to do on this planet, I've done - and then some. Now it's time to go home.

Who wants to grow old and gay? Not me. What exciting things are in store for the gracefully aging gay man in his fifties and sixties and seventies? The gay world buries alive it's elderly in a most criminal way. If you're lucky, you end up with an assortment of diva records and a small yapping dog. I'm glad I'll be dead sooner than later.

I experienced the wild historical flourishing of the gay community in it's hedonistic heyday in this town during the prime of my youth. But I never look back and glorify it. I was more part of the sex and drug culture than the disco bunny world, mostly because that's where the real men were.

I do have some irrational anger against the community for so heavily sexualizing me as a teenager in the seventies, and perhaps exposing me to AIDS before any of us knew what it was, or at least

needlessly inculcating me into that adult world.

As I watched *Tales of the City* last week something occurred to me. In 1976, I thought it was cool that I was dating all these guys. But now I look back and think who in the hell where all those men who dated me as a sixteen year old (!), gave me acid, dust or MDA, or took me to the Barracks or the baths? I was just a teenager, for christsake!

It was not always a wondrous, whimsical time of free wheeling sex and love. It was a time of naive insensitive, sexual selfishness and brain dead disco. Living in the past merely buries yourself alive. The past is only as wonderful as your ability to forget the worst of it.

AIDS humanized our crude sex subculture. It wasn't until I attended my first Louise Hays meeting in L.A. in the mid-eighties that I saw something new. At these meetings, and at subsequent lectures by Marianne Williamson, and various recovery meetings, gay men started to HUG each other. It seems like a simple thing, but

it wasn't common before AIDS. It felt unusual when someone first hugged me after a meeting, without any sexual strings attached. It felt like we were all a family, finally growing up from our dysfunctional past.

AIDS as given us a jump-start of compassion to our once cruel and immature subculture. Our disposable, bitchy attitudes towards each other buried alive the sensitivity we falsely claimed as our own. Isn't that the biggest myth on the books, that gay people are so "sensitive?" Ha! Yet today we resonate from a deeper emotional place because we've taken care of our sick and dying and buried our dead. We've made the best of bad situation and have come of age.

Yet there are still people out there who act like it's 1976 all over again, even though they weren't even born then. What are we to think about the newly targeted group of early twenty year olds who are the latest group in our community to get infected with HIV? Who are they getting it from? Those who

haven't learn from the past are destined to repeat it. I know retro-seventies is fashionable these days, but this is ridiculous.



**The gay world buries alive it's elderly in a most criminal way. If you're lucky, you end up with an assortment of diva records and a small yapping dog.**

ROBERT De ANDREIS

# The AIDS Goldmine - Boom Town or Bust?

JANUARY 26, 1994

**W**hile some die from AIDS, others make a fat living from it. If a cure were found tomorrow, dozens of AIDS administrators in town wouldn't know how they'd pay their bills. I guess they'd have to find another "non-profit" racket to crack.

It's no secret that AIDS is big business. Large sums of non-profit money brings out the worst in the best of us. Common in-house greed, creative bookkeeping, and outright criminal activities are inevitable. Are we so naive to think it hasn't happened at least once in ten years as millions are poured into over two hundred and fifty (!) AIDS organizations citywide? Overlapping services, anyone?

I usually write about my own AIDS story as I have weathered it, which is no more interesting or significant than your own, although I've never been so blinded with terror over the disease that I haven't noticed the bullshit on the road.. It's no secret that I irk some readers. But I'm not running a popularity contest, which is why I've decided to take on this

unpopular topic. In the past year some readers have asked me to report on the excesses of the big AIDS foundations. The usual complaint is that they're perceived as top heavy, with 65% of budgets going to salaries, top benefits packages and posh offices. What exactly do those scores of full-time employees do? There is a rented warehouse filled with useless, dated AIDS products and failed ad campaigns (remember the embarrassingly expensive Mr. Rubberman campaign which was laughed out of every bar in town?) If grants aren't fully spent one year, a lesser amount is awarded the following year - which hardly excuses the goofball spending.

I have heard of properties (homes, cars, boats) being willed to certain AIDS organizations by the dearly departed out of gratuity. And what happens to this valuable property? It's sold at poorly publicized auctions for unbelievably low prices, mainly to insiders.

How have certain individuals made home improvements, using AIDS moneys, on their own private property right before they "retire" from the board? Why is a quarter million AIDS

dollars tied up in money market accounts while client services are cut back? Why do promoters of various "AIDS-athons" take HUGE unpublished salaries? How many all-expense paid trips were funded to go to the Berlin AIDS conference? Should the *Sentinel* publish itemized financial statements from these so-called "non-profit" groups? You tell me.

There is a critical need for independent watchdogs to monitor our AIDS boom town - it's just good business. Who decides the ratio of money budgeted for client services over salaries and administrative "overhead"? Certainly not AIDS clients.

If an AIDS director earns the equivalent of \$100,000 per year including benefits, why can't I get my lousy \$30 P.G. & E bill paid? It pains me to deglamorize myself so ruthlessly just to make a point, but I am technically living below the poverty level, like many former professionals now living on disability or Social Security. I hardly live in a cardboard box underneath the freeway, but I struggle every month on SSI, which doesn't begin to cover my rent. The yearly \$500 allotment from the AIDS Emergency Fund to cover my

utility bills is already exhausted.

To supplement my income, I have taken my resume, master's degree, years of business and teaching experience to Positive Resources, a well-intended HIV job placement service. After my third visit I was finally offered a one day job stuffing dance club flyers under windshield wipers. No thanks; I'd rather roll pennies. Oddly, none of their jobs met with the basic requirement of any person on disability - namely a method of payment that wouldn't jeopardize one's benefits by bumping one into a higher income bracket. I'd lose my entire Medi Cal subsidized health insurance if I made one penny over \$640 per month.

We also need more professional psychological services for AIDS clients, unlike all that chintzy poor-man's peer support group therapy offered all over town. This consists of a few folding chairs, a clip board, and a "facilitator," which is short for "we have the budget for a full-time janitor but not for a licensed staff therapist, but you're such a big AIDS mess you wouldn't know the difference anyway." Free or reduced rate licensed therapy

should be readily available and a top budgetary priority.

The sad tips I have received on a few greedy grave-robbers are an insult to the choir of unsung volunteers who have offered their kind hearts and good intentions to serve the needy - not rip them off.



ROBERT De ANDREIS



# My Project Open Hand Meal Clucked!

FEBRUARY 2, 1994

**P**roject Open Hand is the best AIDS service in town. Their free hand-delivered meals have kept me alive because I hate to cook, and if the truth be known, I'm not too crazy about food either.

I've always been slender, but these days, if I drop a few pounds, I freak. Last spring I worked hard to put on a few pounds, but all was lost when an annoying HIV intestinal disorder pulled the plug on me. I lost weight and my appetite. Today, the very thought of food sends me reeling.

Project Open Hand has an amazing array of free services, courtesy of a complex network of wonderful volunteers. In addition to meals, there is a weekly bag of groceries; I have a whole closet full of cling peaches in heavy syrup), free nutritional supplements and an informational newsletter (the last one, issue #3, included a very helpful food chart. I would have pinned it up in my kitchen but it was printed with the most UN-appetizing blue gray and periwinkle inks you

could imagine!) They offer a half dozen menus, including assorted ethnic and vegetarian, to accommodate various dietary needs. The only thing they don't do is chew it for you.

Last month, a new policy took effect that has many people grumbling. For a variety of reasons, including Health Code violations, hot meals could no longer be left on doorsteps if the client wasn't home. It could be left with a designated neighbor or it's send back. Now I have to sit home between the hours of four and seven or no dinner. Suddenly life got a bit more complicated. But they probably never should have been leaving them on doorsteps to begin with.

This past few weeks my appetite has taken a nose dive. My diners have been pilling up in the freezer, unopened, and shoved to the back. Last Sunday the guy delivering my food asked me if I wouldn't mind delivering an extra one to a neighbor in the building. I had no idea there was someone else in the building with AIDS. I thought maybe this guy

doesn't necessarily want a total stranger to know either. Still I called him several times that night to no answer and forgot all about it.

The next day my dinner arrived and I just couldn't stomach it - there were chicken parts in there so pink they CLUCKED! I grabbed another one from the fridge and it was this brown, runny swamp-like bean thing. I almost lost it. Luckily there was another dinner that looked delicious! It was a snappy Asian rice and beef dish with just a touch of ginger. I threw it in steamer and soon my apartment smelled like Empress Fa's Dragon Lady Kitchen.

Just then my doorbell rang. It was a very sick, fragile man with AIDS, the intravenous passport taped to his forearm was a giveaway. He said his name was Timothy and he lived upstairs and wondered if I had his Asian diner from Project Open Hand. Oh my God! I had totally spaced it out!

I pulled a Lucy Ricardo, "I, uh, well..., it's, uh, well... I ate it by mistake, yeah, that's it."

All the while the aroma of his Asian diner was permeating everywhere. I felt completely embarrassed, ridiculous and utterly speechless - and that's no mean feat!

Frail Timothy told me his AIDS story. Not only is he suffering from MAI and CMV, his lover, Lawrence, is in the hospital with PCP. They don't know how long either of them has. I wasn't prepared for this slap of reality. I stood there listening but my mind went blank. I couldn't think of any insipid small talk. I told him to call if he needed anything, but I was so flustered I couldn't remember my own phone number.

He recognized my name from the *Sentinel* and said how much how he and his lover enjoy my writing every week. He embarrassed me further by recalling a few of my more ridiculous lines. They had no idea I've been living right downstairs - which tells you what a recluse I am.

He mentioned they were thinking of renting a hospital bed so his lover would be more comfortable at home. I was moved by all this, including his

willingness to tell this virtual stranger so much of his painful story. Then something occurred to me for the first time: maybe he felt he knew me from my articles. Oh my God! That's a scary thought!

Beyond these four walls, in any direction, there are other AIDS story waiting to be told - yet most are never heard. Every afternoon I go for a walk to stimulate my appetite. Today when I returned I noticed a medical supply truck delivering a hospital bed upstairs. Thank God! At least someone will be home now for those Project Open Hand deliveries!



ROBERT De ANDREIS

# Get Those Tacky Weeds Out of My Urn

FEBRUARY 9, 1994

**I** just bought a fabulous alabaster vase at a garage sale in the Castro and manage to pry off its strange top. Oops! What a mess!

Before I realize someone mistakenly sold me ashes of a loved one, I've got the remains of a stranger resting in my Dust Buster!

Remember the good old days when you simply died and went to heaven? These days you have to make the transition, visualize a ball of golden light, absorb into the universe as your inner angel cleanses your higher self into healing pools of flowing light. Sounds more like a commercial for New Ultra Tide to me.

No matter what you fear about the terminal nature of death, it's still a sacred part of life. Yet some people have an almost superstitious reluctance to contemplate their own mortality - as if the mere thought alone could jinx their remaining time on the planet. Draw a life line, from birth to death, and circle where you think you are right now. Isn't it ludicrous not to be thinking about it, even in passing?

Some say, "Why spend the little time I have left dwelling on death?" It's the same principle behind earthquake preparedness. How many people actually lit their quake-proof candles or opened their emergency cans of cling peaches? Not many, I'm sure. Yet no one believes that preparing for an earthquake cause one.

The contemplation process gives you a sense of well-being and control, even if it's just an illusion. If you spend some quality time thinking about death - hopefully your indifference to it - you may actually achieve some peace of mind.

Reflecting back on life's regrets and failures is a cruel device that deflects fear thoughts and whittles away at your happiness. Whether you are going to die now or later, get real with your fears. A few weeks ago I wrote that I wasn't worried about dying. It must have been a mood thing because today the thought terrifies me.

Perhaps one day in the distant future my sister will find a brittle copy of this very article in the bottom of a shoe

box in the year 2034, but she'll be old and gray. Perhaps my little nephew Nicky, all grown up, will find faded photos of me and Bob holding hands, laughing, acting silly. He'll have no idea that Bob was my lover.

And what about our love letters? Should I burn them now or bury them later? Who would read them - or throw them out? Slowly they become artifacts by default, then disappear like dust in the wind.

One day my friends will drag my stuff out on the street for that one last garage sale - which is where most of it came from to begin with. What will happened to the primitive terra-cotta relic my friend Alan gave me before he died? When it's found in my kitchen drawer will it be tossed or sold as a piece of junk?

As for that enlightened master who wrote the *Sentinel* last week saying I haven't resolved my death issues, let me say this: I applaud you if you can stand on the roof of S.F. General, with a tube in your arm and your butt hanging out of a hospital

gown belting out *Everything's Coming Up Roses*.

Of course, I don't want to die, I'm just sick to death of death. It numbs me that many of my friends have died. How do you ever get over it? It haunts me to think how richer my life would be if they were still around.

There, I just shed a few tears right into my keyboard. I feel better, somehow refreshed. Sometimes that's all it takes. I am not fixated on AIDS or death but writing about it every week has forced me to focus on it more than usual. Before I started this column, I hardly thought about any of it - which wasn't healthy either.

It would be easier to write every week about a bunch of AIDS statistics, the latest drug studies, and safe sex. But I find occasional explorations into fear and sadness to be more healing; it's a purging process. Besides, once the veils are lifted from these mysteries, one is free to enjoy life's remaining veils.

Sometimes, when I read AIDS medical journals, alternative or otherwise, they seem cold and impersonal. I

am not all that jargon and the ensuing battles that go with it. I am not an AIDS study, a statistic, a victim, a blip of medical terminology, a t-cell count, an experimental treatment. I've been reading about AIDS for years and conclude that an overload of medical information is unnecessary for the layman and only creates anxiety.

Do you overwhelm yourself with back issues of Beta and Treatment Issues then torment yourself with feeling like you have to personally invent a cure? What a heavy burden to put on weak shoulders. A little levity may help, but it's no cure either. A healthy dose of sarcasm may be the better medicine - but it's still a bitter pill.



# Restoring a Subculture Named Desire

FEBRUARY 16, 1994

**The most taboo subject in the gay world is not greasy fists, slings, little boys or cock piercing. It's the relationship between the past and the present; more specifically, between what we did and what we've become.**

If you are of a certain age, you know what we did because you were there doing it - unsafe sex until the leather-clad cows came home, nonstop as if there was no tomorrow - and now we find out there wasn't, was there? How willing are we to look at that question today, now that the shit's hit the fan?

In the begining we desperately wanted to believe it was some big government plot. But the dust settled and the unspoken horror sank in - WE unknowingly gave this disease to each other. Today we know better, yet we are STILL giving this disease to each other - only now we can't blame Ron and Nancy.

Massive sexual hysteria swept through the burgeoning gay community twenty years ago. Whether it started out as

a joyous expression of freedom or as the release of generations of pent up sexual oppression, it spun out of control.

Responsibility is a concept that predicates some prior knowledge of risk. I became infected back then, before we knew. So those who say I should "take responsibility" for getting AIDS imply that I should have had some initial moral reservations about sexual promiscuity prior to AIDS, which I never had. I am, however, responsible for how I've cared for myself since testing positive - but even then, up to a point.

In the case of AIDS, since we like to be called survivors, not victims, we are reluctant to see ourselves as the innocent bystanders that we were. We were innocent, it wasn't our fault and we didn't do anything wrong. But that was then. Is that this still the case with today's recent sero-converts?

If I was hell bent on high-level metaphysics, I might say that there will be NO cure until we clean house - own our past and resolve it, rethink how we treat our most undesirable members, and redefine our spiritual selves despite the overt homophobia

in organized religions. But I'm not into that stuff.

I have an outtake for you. My sister dropped by to see how I was doing. The remarkable thing was that she didn't call first and I was perfectly glad to see her. We both know how far I've come from the days when I wouldn't answer a doorbell on a Sunday afternoon because I had a burnt nose, black sheets pinned over the windows, Vaseline on the walls and some greasy guy in bed who looked a lot better in that pitch black bar. Remember those good old days?

If you think I've shown a lack of respect for the dignity of dying, think again - there's no hierarchy in dymystification. Also, the truly sacred can never be denigrated. Anyway, sometimes dignity ends up meaning: "phoney, concealing emotion, saving face." Do these same guys consider depersonalized sexual activity to be a breach of dignity? Isn't sex just as sacred as death? Isn't every part of human life sacred, whether it's having baby or taking a shit?

We can't have it both ways. Either our sexual behavior of

yesteryear had no consequence and was above reproach or there was physical, emotional and spiritual fallout from it all, AIDS or no AIDS. We can't start to heal if we don't admit we've been damaged by some of it. What ever we will become as a gay culture is alot more exciting than what we were. Things will NEVER go back to the way they were, unless we haven't learned from our past. It's up to us to reinvent our future.

While some gay folks ended up with the white picket fence, others choose life on the other side of the fence. Still, we have all inherited the same debt. More than any other high-risk group, we have the social infrastructure in place to disseminate it from our ranks, yet new cases appear daily.

Truth is to be faced, not fluttered away from. Maybe Blanche, in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, ends up losing her mind because she is no longer the belle of the ball and can't face her age, her diminished sexual desire, her distorted recollection of the past, and her dependence on the kindness of strangers.

Four steamy minutes from the original *Streetcar*

were restored after being cut by censors. But don't forget, YOU could get AIDS in just four steamy minutes! Yet Vivian Leigh still won an Oscar for Blanche. I guess that means you could cut out your nastiest scenes and still give the performance of a lifetime.



**If you think I've shown a lack of respect for the dignity of dying, think again... the truly sacred can never be denigrated**

ROBERT DeANDREIS

# Week Test Patience, Among Other things

FEBRUARY 23, 1994

**I** saw my nurse-practitioner last week because I had minor chest pains. But my lungs sounded fine to her. Instead, she noticed KS lesions - on my face! That's why I burst into tears as I ran down the metal stairwell at Kaiser.

I was half way down the block before I realized I needed to go back and wait at the pharmacy for my prescription for a medication that is barely putting a dent on a six month bout of a chronic intestinal disorder.

The week started on a bad note. I went over to my folks house for diner and ended up spending the night. I had such an emotional draining mother-son talk with my mom about my illness, I went to bed exhausted. The last thing I wanted to tell her was that I was having chest pains. I could barely bend down to tie my shoe.

If you've ever experienced shortness of breath you know how frightening it is. It feels like you're drowning or suffocating. If you take a deep

breath, there's pain and constriction. If you walk up a flight of stairs, you have to stop, feeling trapped. If this ever happens, sit down and rest. Then call your doctor, like I did.

When I got home from my parents, there was a note on my door indicating I didn't call Project Open Hand to cancel my deliver that night and now my poor upstairs neighbor Timothy was holding it. I had mentioned him and his ailing lover in an article recently about another delivery mix-up. When I called him he told me that his lover died peacefully at home week that week.

I went to my doctor's for a chest x-ray then went home waiting for the news. The phone rang. It was my ex, Bob, calling from Chicago! We've been getting along great - now that he's two thousand miles away. He called because he had a disturbing dream that I died.

I was still in shock about the KS and hardly able to contain my upset. "Bob, I'm getting a biopsy done on some suspicious KS lesions on my, my... ah, my face!" Yet somehow, by the end of talk, we were laughing it off. I felt

a great comfort in leaning on his broad, long-distant shoulders.

Later my nurse called with the news about the chest x-ray. "What ever it is, we're catching it early. We don't think it's PCP but it's some kind of phenomena. We're going to need you to come in for some tests, a sputum test and a lung fluid needle biopsy." I was feeling queasy. "What's a needle biopsy?" "First you go to Ultrasound and they find the location of the fluid on the screen. Then they extract some fluid so we can find out exactly what you have."

"But this needle part, where, I mean how...?" I asked.

"Depending on where the fluid is, they push a needle into your chest or through your back," she said, assuring me it was a high-tech, low discomfort procedure and scheduled it for the next morning. I tossed and turned all night, listening to the rain. Because of the nature of the high-tech Ultrasound procedure, the examination rooms are dimly lit and a few degrees cooler. Is that why I sat there shivering in a hospital gown - or was I getting more serious chills?

My doctor used a cold metal scope to scan my lungs for fluid. She found it, all right. But it was so small that there was a danger in trying to target it with the needle. There was a chance she could puncture my spleen or I could end up with a collapsed lung. We opted for alternative tests.

I felt a great deal of comfort later by calling my dear friend Ed, who is so sick he's moving back to his mom's place out of state. Just last year I was the sick one and he was asking me a million questions about my minor bout with PCP the year before.

Last summer we were sunbathing in Marin, he had a brand new boyfriend, and we were laughing up a storm on those sunny drives across the bridge. Since then he contracted four separate cases of PCP, the veins on his arms are shot and he woke up in the hospital with a plastic device implanted in his chest to better access his infusion medication.

Now I'm asking him a million questions. His system broke down so fast, after being asymptomatic for years, now he's the resident expert. "Robert, don't worry about that KS, it's the least of your

worries. They treat 'em, they go away, they come back - it's no big deal." We laughed together one more time. I haven't heard from him since.

This week I've been through several tests, upgraded medications, sleepless nights, fatigue, vomiting, fevers and various other personal problems. I will recover from this bout and regain some of my health over time. But I better get used to these kinds of setbacks. It goes along with having less than 40t-cells.



ROBERT De ANDREIS

# Waiting For A Swan Song? Forget It

MARCH 2, 1994

**I** wasn't planning to write this week because I contracted pneumonia. But things are looking up at the moment so I thought I'd take a shot at it - despite all the discomfort.

I'm not doing you any favor - this is strictly for me. I just been through Hell Week and the worst is over - for now. Last week I finally disclosed my t-cell status, which is below forty. I debated this decision for months. At first I thought, "Yeah, I'm an honest writer and all that crap, but this is simply too personal." And there is such a stigma around those double-digit counts.

For some reason, I deemed it more personal than all the other salacious items I've disclosed about my sex life - which seem to be more a matter of public information anyway, courtesy of a few extremely indiscreet former tricks in town who seem to think it's okay that they are equally as "honest" about my private sexual past. When these stories get back to me, I am so offended and hurt by

their objectifying tone. Please! My sexual side-show days are over. Give a dying man a little respect.

Whew! I've wanted to say that for months. As far as all that t-cell drama goes, I decided to mention it because I know people go absolutely BONKERS over those numbers. And if you're a big t-cell bean counter you probably assume I would be dead by now. Boo!

No, I am not writing from the Great Beyond - yet! But if I do end up faxing from heaven, I want no more typos in my work or I'll haunt the *Sentinel* office forever!

*Sentinel* publisher Ray Chalker called me the other day when he heard I was sick to see if he could help in any way. We ended up chatting and joking around which is always the best help. He said when B.A.R. publisher, Bob Ross, croaks he's got the cover already planned: "Ding Dong the Witch is Dead!" Oh, those two!

Ray read a letter to cheer me up from a pleased reader of my work. But apparently he hadn't read it all the way through

because the reader added that I was the only reason he picked up the *Sentinel*. Then he started trashing the paper. I don't get it. I am such a big fan of all the other excellent writer's on board.

I'd like to finally disclose something. Ray has given me total editorial freedom; he has never pulled a story or changed a word. That kind of freedom is unheard of in journalism, and it's enabled me to grow tremendously. I never even considered myself to be a writer before this and it's still a somewhat foreign concept to me.

Ray hired me sight unseen based on a spec article I wrote last summer. I had no clippings, no writing credentials, in fact - I had never written a thing before this stint. I am so grateful and it keeps me going in a major way. I had always hoped one day I would be able to offer to my gay peers a more significant part of myself.

I mention all this because in my darkest, sweatiest, vomit-ridden, clammiest, fever-delirious hour of my sickness this week I received a call

from a writer who invited me to join him in April for a reading of our respective work during the writer's series at *A Different Light Bookstore*. And, yes, I think I can hang on to dear life until then.

Despite my elevated mood this moment, I am not out of the woods yet. I've lost so much weight it has become nearly impossible for me to sleep - the bones have so little cushion. Every time I look in the mirror I break down, so I don't look anymore.

Last week during the Olympics, ladies figure skater Oksana Baiul did her routine dressed as the Black Swan from Swan Lake. As soon as I heard the music I started uncontrollably sobbing. I had trained so hard in New York at the School of American Ballet ten years ago. Any student of dance knows that music so well and all those grueling years came flooding back.

Back then I could jump so high, spin and fly through the air with my powerful thighs. My lanky body was so tight and firm, I was in my peak physical form. That haunting music brought it all back as I

looked down at my out-of-shape, chicken legs, feeling like a dying swan, plucked and past it's prime. Muscle tissue is the first thing to go, honey. And it's not a pretty picture.

But this week I tried to hold some pretty pictures in my head as I struggled through delirium. I visualized myself in black tights and white tee-shirt again jumping high and soaring in the blue sky over lush green fields of grass. And I'm feeling radiant because I feel a cure is almost in sight.

But then my fever would climb, my chest pains sharpen, I'd loose focus of the image, and end up jumping in the lake with the rest of those damn swans.



# Living Alone is Not A Tower of Gloom

MARCH 9, 1994

**This past month I felt like I was pushed backwards down a flight of stairs. I am in a period of recovery at the moment and wonder if I'll be able to get through all this on my own.**

All week long, the thought of continuing to write this column somewhat repelled me. I am sick of reflecting on my situation so personally for my imagined readers. Believe it or not, all the work I've done writing over the past nine months as netted me little more than a few letters and the casual acquaintance of two people. And now, the last thing I want to do is meet anybody.

I don't know if I'll be able to continue this process. But once I stop, there is even less going on in my life. For whatever reasons, I gradually created the life I have now - monastic, simple, devoid of social interaction. But what once

was a beautiful apartment with a sweeping view as become an imprisoning tower - the hills are so steep around here I have barely the stamina to walk around the block, let alone down to the store.

My family, especially my dad, as all come through in a wonderful way. During the peak of my medical crisis my dad drove me to all my appointments and listened to all my babbling concerns. I can honestly say that we have become friends in a real way. Over the past few months, conversations we've had became the basis for several articles I've written.

I just learned that there are a couple of more pills I'll be taking now that my doctor has finally diagnosed me with MAI- a chronic, systemic microbial condition that showed up on my sputum test for TB. I asked my nurse how long I'll have to take the pills. "For the rest of your life,

Robert." I didn't ask her to get more specific.

The first few days and even weeks of taking new medicine can be depressing - the taste, the possible side effects, the tolerance level - all are unknown until it's in your system for awhile. Give your body a break during this period, allow it to adjust, rest more and try not to focus on it. In a month or two it will be just another pill you pop without even thinking about it.

Yes, I've had some depressing moments of despair, despite all the work I think I've done on mental preparation. I keep telling myself that I will get through this, that this is a temporary hurdle, that I will be able to one day bop around the Castro in shorts and tanned legs flirting again. But it will all eventually have to go someday.

If I think about anything too much I trouble myself

unnecessarily. I have been trying so hard to stay focused in the exact present moment - without berating myself for the past or tormenting myself with worst case future scenarios. It can become a comfort to stay in the moment - but it is a mental skill that requires practice.

Even though my life is extremely reclusive, I take responsibility for creating that. On some level I have been building up towards this for the past few years. Ultimately, I have a personal preference for solitude for healing. I still enjoy occasional visitors, but I have on almost biological need to be still in the presence of myself - sleep when I want to, take care of my basic concerns, without having to interact with other people and all their issues around my illness. Aren't you tired of trying to make it easy for everyone else to deal with your AIDS?

Yes, there will come a day when I will most likely move back into my parent's house. That may not be for a long time. But if you're living by yourself, honor that. It is not necessarily a lonely thing at all, in fact, many prefer it's special brand of comfort. And it sure beats some tired roommate asking you how you are every five minutes.



ROBERT De ANDREIS

# Beauty Tips For The Nearly Departed

MARCH 16, 1994

**S**pring is here, so crawl out of your winter caves and plant some daffodils on me. Not literally - because I've just clawed my way out of an early grave and boy do I need a manicure.

No more tomb and gloom for me, it's spring cleaning time. Today I have some hints to make AIDS life a little easier. Take it all with a grain of salt - especially if you're on a low sodium diet.

Buy a notebook and keep a medical diary of all your symptoms, medications, and concerns. Write down what the doctor says and jot down your own questions before hand. Keep track of your weight, diet and exercise programs.

Get rid of those old glass thermometers. Buy a good easy-to-read digital kind that saves in memory the previous temperature so you can instantly tell if it's gone up or down.

I had months of chronic diarrhea before it was finally treated as MAI and cleared up. I spent many nervous night

worrying I would shit my bed - I even chipped a front tooth from anxious night grinding. Get over the stigma of wearing protective underbriefs and you'll finally get a good night sleep.

If you're cold in your apartment, wear a comfortable jacket. If you have a spike fever, throw a few ice cube in a Ziploc bag for an instant ice bag. If you have to piss in the middle of the night but are so chilled you can't move, keep a bucket nearby.

To stimulate your appetite, buy orange placemats or an orange table cloth. It's clinically proven to be the most appetizing color. I gained five pounds this week by eating a few orange placemats. And they were just loaded with fiber!

Go to a bath store and pick up some soothing bath additives for a refreshing treat. Try using basic massage oils in the tub to moisturize and refresh. Open the bottle and smell it first. I took a whiff of something called The Crack of Dawn and passed on it. That Dawn could use a bath herself.

AIDS skin is dry skin. If you have chronic diarrhea your

hands may be dry from too much hand washing - and prone to paper cuts, especially if you have to open up all those angry letters from bill collectors. A dab of glue stick work like crazy on paper cuts. That's glue stick not crazy glue.

If you can't pay your bills - don't. Say, "I'm sorry but I've got full-blown AIDS. Do you really want to wheel me into court on a stretcher?" My credit rating is the least of my worries these days.

Use non-toxic household cleaners like white vinegar, baking soda and dishwashing liquid. These work just fine even for cleaning the toilet. Just make sure no one's using it at the time.

My big house plants have been a comfort from AIDS World because it's a jungle out there. Buy a sick friends flowering plants, they last longer than the cut kind and cost the same. I just bought a couple of goldfish, Kay and Ess, for some added cheer. But I don't know how long they'll last around here. After all, they are orange.

Toss out those icy, faux-masculine, black and white

Herb Ritts style torso-fetished photos that pass for high brow art with the gay white trash set. Instead buy something wonderfully colorful for your walls. Cheerfulness is not a gender issue.

Did you know Viacom has a special flat rate for the disabled? You can get greatly reduced cab fare booklets from Paratransit Broker. You can also get free dental work at the University of Pacific. If you're up for work, call Brian Basinger at Positive Resources. He'll work his pants off for you!

I checked out some non-AIDS books at the local library for my reading pleasure. I figure I better do it now before Mayor Jordon flip-flops, closes them down, sells the books to balance the budget and uses the buildings to house the homeless.

Try windowsill gardening, sketch your view, try needlepoint, write your life story, do light stretching, learn to cook your favorite foods, read the classics, rent old movies - anything to enjoy life a bit more and stop obsessing over your disease.

The real reason I won't go through that prickly Sulpha desensitization program to tolerate Septra, the preferred PCP prophylaxis, is because my aerosol Pentamidine clinic always carries those fabulous woman's magazines filled with great fun, recipes, health and beauty tips. Can you tell I've been reading a few?

It takes balls to live with AIDS day to day. If you can't add some fun and beauty to your life, you're not long-term surviving shit! None of these tricks are a magic bullet for anything. They're more like magic tricks - before your final, sun shiny curtain comes down.



# Win Back Your Ex From Your Deathbed

MARCH 23, 1994

**A**lthough it's a sunny day, I'm sitting here bundled up with a blanket, wearing sunglasses and an eye patch with the shades drawn tight. I just know I'm going to have chills again tonight and there's nothing I can do about it.

I have some mysterious eye disorder that won't clear up despite three weeks of stinging drops once every hour and finally some gooey ointment I have to place on the eyeball. I've seen two specialist and the last one thinks it's a herpetic lesion which would be my first sign of herpes. If that's the case I'll be taking Acyclovir eight times a day for the rest of my life. Just what I need - more pills.

During this last six weeks of my health crisis I did not see my doctor once! He was on vacation so everything was properly handled by his nurse-practitioner, which seems to be standard procedure these days. When I did see him this week he called me into his office, but he was standing silhouette against a big bright picture

window. My eyes were watering from the light as I rummaged through my bag for my dark glasses.

I couldn't find them and held my hand over my eyes. As soon as I grasped what we was telling me I prayed I wouldn't appear to be crying. Normally I would have greeted this news with a smug indifference - it was absurd to be putting a time table on my life to begin with. But my cool, nonchalant moment was being upstaged by the Eyeball from Hell.

I didn't even ask him how much long I had to live. I appreciate the awkward situation he must feel every time he goes through this. I was just asking him what should I expect with a very low t-cell count, an MAI and KS diagnosis.

"Now is the time to take a trip, or see someone you'd like to see. Do it now when things are going okay for the moment," he said. I'm over all that. That phenomenon is called The Last Quest whereby the ill person scrambles around trying to grab that last slice of life - usually getting sicker in the process. No, the only person I want to see is moving

back in May. A few weeks ago I started a series of carefully calculated phone calls to my ex-sweetheart, Bob, who is living with a lover in Chicago. In the heat of my sickness I panicked and asked him to come out and help me. We had made a vow before we got the results of our HIV test some six years ago: if one got sick, the other one would come and caregive.

The problem was prying off that jailbait lover of his in aruthless yet subtle way. I figured if God didn't want me to be a bitch, I wouldn't have been born with claws. I used a reverse psychology approach by coming off as supporting their troubled relationship and advocating complete honesty between them. That meant Bob would finally have to disclose his HIV status to his lover.

Bob has always been a great rescuer and receives much pleasure from caregiving; he took care of his first lover during his last days. Sure, there have always been a few things that troubled me about Bob: he's got a fireproof safe with God knows what inside, there are those spare police

uniforms hanging up in his closet, and his assorted collection of firearms.

I told him to come back for reasons other than just me. His family is here and they've been carrying his insurance since he left. He said he wants to come back and set up house while he still can - not to come back all sick where his options are limited. I think he is finally ready to confront his own HIV issues.

I have wanted that special intimate support since I've gotten sick, not that I won't be able to manage just fine by myself. AIDS is about the ailing body - holding it, soothing it, sleeping next to it. It will be an extra comforting to have his big, burly arms around my skinny body. I'm sure there will be times when we'll want to kill each other, but not until I've signed a living will.

Bob called yesterday morning, and as usual, I had just been thinking about him. He confirmed his moving plans and I expressed a measured excitement. I will have to lay down a few rules; I hope he doesn't think we're still going to be having sex.

With a stinging eye sealed shut, I proceeded to tell him my doctor's prognosis. "He said I have three to eighteen months left to live." Despite the appearance of my crying eye, we both laughed at the rudeness of the claim. Besides, if Bob comes back I'm sure I'll be able to hang in there for nineteen or twenty months. Unless, of course, the quality of my life becomes unbearable. Then Bob will come through in the best possible way - he'll blow my head off.



**I figured if God didn't want me to be a bitch, I wouldn't have been born with claws.**

ROBERT De ANDREIS



# The Sweaty Monster Haunts The Night

MARCH 30, 1994

**I** writing this now because I may me admitted to to the hospital tomorrow. If you think I'm going to handwrite a "You Are There" article from my hospital bed, think again. Although I'm sure I will accept that challenge one day in the near future.

I used to love all the allure and mystery of the night on the streets of the city. I always felt safe, completely at home. These days all the things that happen to me in the middle of the night, in the safety of my own home, all add up to some cheap AIDS horror flick - with me as the monster.

I fell asleep last night at seven. By eight o' clock I bolted from my sleep. My pillows and T-shirt where drenched, I had never experienced a night sweat so severe. I had a 104 temperature and became confused and disoriented, which can happen with a dangerous temperature. At midnight I stumbled out of bed to turn the heat down and fell. I had to hold on to the wall for support.

At three o'clock I had a full bladder and forgot to ready my bucket. Instead it took me a full hour of chills to get the courage to throw off those blankets and go. There is something in all the medication I'm trying to adjust to that makes me racy. It's got to be the reason I can't get my foot to stop nervously shaking all night long. Oh well, at least it's a little exercise.

One or two of my friends, HIV newborns, always end up giving me ADVICE on my medications; my doctor has worked with more AIDS patients than they have. They are still telling me AIDS is a hoax and all this short-term life prolonging medication is poison. Well it IS poison, it's just a shot at a little more time in the short run. Before this, I never took an antiviral in my life. All our medical protocols are intensely personal decisions, with intense vulnerability to any decision. Who needs ten well-intended friends giving you all kinds advice? You get strong on any path by not giving your power away to others, and honoring what ever plan you have.

These guys who have never been through any symptoms or lost any friends, can't imagine how irritating their well-intended advice - like chalk on a blackboard. I need friends to loving support any decision, not constantly challenging it. This morning my lifelong friend called me to spend a cozy evening with him and his lover Warren to watch the Academy Awards. I had no idea they were even happening this month.

He has suffered many painful losses through AIDS, and developed a comforting manner towards my illness. Sure, there is high level citywide burnout, but those guys end up being the best hard-boiled experts on what to ask, when to listen, what not to say, and slap a few jokes in there.

I called him this morning to see he could drive me to the emergency room. Within five minutes he was describing how he'd come by to take care of me himself - in Divine nurse drag! Last week he offered to pay for cable TV for me, which I graciously accepted.

What's ironic is that I am not even thinking about death

these days, I'm totally focused on working my writing job the best I can. It was all the heavy-hitting death articles I wrote recently that really purged it from my system. It really pays to get it out of your system.

I have been totally indifferent to politics all my life, to the initial irritation of my friends. Although I was never out there getting petitions signed, blowing whistles, going to rallies and marches but I am finally contributing to the IDS crisis in my own way. There have been far too few first person accounts. Most AIDS writing focuses on the political, social and medical aspects.

I have received letters from Mom's of HIV sons who have said all my information has helped to demystify some of what lies ahead. Don't forget many parents are entering this ignorant. They haven't been reading about it over the past ten years, or living through any AIDS loss. We must use many resources to educate them ourselves.

My amazingly supportive and resourceful sister, Yvette, gave me a great idea today.

I've pulled a relaxing, New Age tapes from deep storage. When I wake ten times tonight, and twitch with non-stop racing thought and that foot that won't shut up, I will gentle each over and press my tape player. After all, music soothes the savage beast.



**I used to love all the allure and mystery of the night on the streets of the city. These days all the things that happen to me in the middle of the night, all add up to some cheap AIDS horror flick - with me as the monster.**

# Your Robe And Slippers Can Kill You

APRIL 6, 1994

**S**omething went terribly wrong with my body last week. I could no longer blame the nightly cycle of chills and high fevers to adjustments to the new medicines. So on Monday I called my nurse to face the music, and it wasn't happy tune.

I called my friend Jim in L.A. to warn him about my health. He had already purchased tickets to visit up from L.A. My health was looking up at the time of our plan. But now I was telling him he may have to let himself into my place on his own - because I may be in the hospital.

Last month, after being diagnosed with MAI in my lungs, my nurse said, "The next time this happens we may check you into the hospital for a few days until it clears up." So with the return of all that fever madness last week, I thought the possibility existed. So I started packing an overnight bag - just in case.

A warning about fevers and bathrobes: I stumbled out of bed one night to turn the ceiling fan on. I was so disoriented, I tripped over the long robe belt. The momentum of the fall snarled the belt around my feet like a lasso and the other end got thrown up into the fan and flung me upside down, spinning me around all night like a trap from a Tarzan movie. Don't laugh - it could happen to you.

My nurse decided to order a sputum test for PCP, my forth in as many weeks. She scheduled a bronchoscopy just in case it came back negative. I began treatment for presumptive PCP by starting a pair of killer drugs that seem to get more toxic with each passing day. I didn't know how I'd stomach the full twenty-one day cycle.

Jim and I met during the heyday of healing divas in L.A. when Marianne Williamson, Louise Hay, alternative treatments and buyers clubs offered so much hope. If only you had the right attitude you'd realize that, well, AIDS was all in your mind. I had just tested positive and was vulnerable to

suggestion. My new, non-medical support friends convinced me that all antivirals were POISON. That was main reason I never took them - it was a hard belief to shake.

Two years ago they wanted to do a bronchoscopy, but I said no one's going to shove a wire down my throat to yank out some lung tissue. So far I've avoided it, despite 4 x-rays and 4 sputum test all not showing PCP. But when my nurse called to say this latest sputum test came back negative I finally agreed. I needed to know what was going on with my body. I was to go to hospital admitting at 7:30 and I should have some one pick me up around noon, because I'd still feel woozy.

I called Jim and said I'd be sedated when he arrived. I made one request, "I know you're heart's in the right place, but I don't want to hear one word about AIDS treatments, theories, alternative medicine, or even how I'm doing - I'm so burnt on discussing my illness. If I need to talk about it, I'll bring it up. I want us to talk about all the fun stuff we used to talked about before I got sick."

I checked in to the hospital expecting I'd be in some dentist chair type thing - slam, bam, and home by noon. Instead a nurse told me to get undress and handed me a hospital gown and some wimpy sock-like things. "Oh no," she said, "those are 'traction slippers,' and you've got them on inside out. You don't want to slip and split your skull, do you?" I had to think about that for a second. Suddenly I was in a hospital bed with an IV stuck in the back of my hand being wheeled down strange hallways.

The orderly hoisted me off the bed on to this chair that reclined and strapped me down. The doctor shoved these long Q-tips with goo up my nose. He explained he'd also have to shove a tube up my nose and another down my throat but that I'd soon be asleep...

It seemed like a minute later and I was in the recovery room. The procedure was over. When they wheeled me back, my dad was waiting for me. I thought I was doing just fine, but when I got home, all that additional IV drug buildup

created a queasy soup in the pit of my gut.

Jim quickly learned an important lesson: beware the misleading charms of the telephone voice; you can never tell the gravity of someone's health until you see him in person. Jim had the grace and charm not to recoil in shock as I opened the door and he hugged this one-time cutie turned major AIDS mess. I was expecting him to shriek in horror.

Right now, I am in a tunnel of weakness and nausea from toxic drug build-up. I'm crawling as out as fast I can because there is a light at the end of this tunnel. But it's not hope. It's the headlights of a Macy's truck delivering my new robe - and it's careening right towards me.



# We've Got To Stop Meeting Like This

APRIL 13, 1994

**A**m I overexposing myself every week or have you become an AIDS voyeur, peeping in on my private life? Well damn if you'll get one more peek because I'm finally drawing down my shades.

I've been doing myself a disservice by reporting on my recent health problems - it's kept me focused on them much longer than I would have had I not been writing these goddamn little monsters every week. Usually when troublesome things happen in my life, I just let them go. But I set up this odd standard of personal disclosure that is too close for comfort.

I need to change the focus of my writing or I'm going to burn myself out. I've slipped into the exact thing I swore I'd never do - focus on the medical. It is very clear to me that the sickness part is the most ordinary part of the journey, quite boring - and there is nothing heroic about it.

The best part of the HIV experience happens after you test positive and before you get sick. It transformed my life - I

sorted out my past, picked up some spiritual pointers, and healed past relationships. I restructured my life - all because I knew my days were numbered. There is tremendous opportunity for personal growth, but it takes hard work and a serious confrontation with the truth.

There is nothing heroic about getting sick. When obituaries say someone bravely fought the battle against their illness, it's kind of rude - because you're also saying they lost. I wish to be gently taken into the night. For my obit I'd prefer something more real: "He's been through the same ordeal everyone else who's died of AIDS as been through - including those days he was an irritable BITCH! In fact if he didn't die soon, we would have killed him ourselves." Note: never give your caregivers the final word.

The most insensitive thing you could say to a terminally ill person is that they are going to pull through, if they don't give up hope. Yeah, blame that victim. I'm sick not because I have given up hope, yet there is a subtle implication in those cheerleading

statements - if you could just get down on your knees, squeeze your hands real tight and pray with all your might, everything's going to be all better.

Well, honey, let me tell you something - there are limitations to the will. The plague takes over regardless of all your nightly prayers - Death, waits for no one. Whether you have AIDS, cancer, are get shot in the back, one day you will lose control over the tiny realm of your own body - overthrown and locked in the tower while your whole kingdom crumbles around you. Ha!

Just for the record, I have never given up hope, but it's a different kind of hope than you might think. I always hoped that when this moment came, inevitable sickness and death, I would be comfortable, free and clear of any worries, and surrounded by loving people. And my deepest hopes have been realized.

I am not depressed, afraid or preoccupied with silly questions about life from beyond the grave. They are distracting puzzles and not for me to be concerned with right

now. I've led my life as best as I could, was a good person and a kind and loving man to others - and that has been its own reward.

Every year my concept of spirituality grows - because I keep thinking it through for myself. It was a new thought for me today to say that certain basic questions aren't for me to contemplate. Too often adults still believe all the Sunday school concept they learned in the second grade. They may lead successful, sophisticated corporate lives yet still believe that angels have wings and God is a man.

"Help me, I'm dying. Quick send me a priest - but not from this list of those who molested me as an altar boy." Out-of-character last minute deathbed connections with religion become nothing more than cheap melodrama - and a clear indication that the dying person did absolutely zilch to look at any of these issues as an adult. Tailor-make your spiritual program without being a slave to tradition. Sort out what seems real for you. If you accept any one path lock, stock and barrel you deeply undercut your own

participation in the process. All that fixation on prayer and ritual becomes a rote, almost hypnotic way of not feeling anything at all.

If you read between the lines of any spiritual book you will discover the concept of healing is always a healing of the mind, and never the physical body, despite the claims of charismatic spiritual teachers who should know better. What they do know is that promises of healing the body sells better. True healing is simply a complete and peaceful acceptance of the situation at hand. If that is the case, then I must say I am completely healed from AIDS. It's a miracle!



ROBERT De ANDREIS

# Please Stop Poking Through My Trash

APRIL 20, 1994

**I**n feverish states these past weeks, I could think of nothing better I wanted to do than throw away several items of incriminating evidence. And now it's all forever buried in some big garbage dumb where it belongs.

Don't get me wrong, I'm proud of ever aspect of my life. It's just that I feel a certain obligation and respect to my family, who will most likely end up going through my papers and personal effects - and, well, I don't want the effects to be too personal.

I remember all too well my friend Paul handing me his apartment key as he lay dying, "Take anything you want." The only thing of value as far as I was concerned were his stacks of journals, writings and personal letters. I boxed it all up and shoved it in my closet - where it remained for several years.

I hauled it down when I moved to L.A., from one apartment to another, yet I never quite knew what to do with it. Every time I attempted to read his scrawly pencil handwriting, it all seemed like personal ramblings. He detested his family and forbid me to pass it on. I had made some sort of deathbed promise that I would be it's guardian.

On rare occasions, when I had the strength to riffle through it, it made me incredibly sad. Illness came so quick to him ten years ago before we had our basic treatment drugs. He went in the hospital for a persistent cold and a week later he was dead from pneumonia.

We had only been co-workers at an espresso bar downtown and spent our friendship time absurdly laughing together on the phone. I don't think I knew Paul for more than a year. And for the past few years, I've been saddled with a responsibility I didn't quite deserve.

Over those years, I would gradually thin out his file. Our relationship was built on a kind of surreal high-end style humor than could best be described as narcotic - one that we both needed to chase away our demons. These stuffy old papers didn't reflect that at all. So I finally did the sensible thing - I tossed them. Now happier images of Paul have returned in a way I'm sure he would be most delighted with.

I pulled out my file box filled with a few hundred pictures of me and my former lover, Bob. He bought me a beautiful camera one year and it brought us much pleasure over the years. As I began sorting through the stacks, there emerged three basic categorize - clad, scantily clad and OH MY GOODNESS! As I began tossing several, something occurred to me: why would I even think of leaving torso shots of Bob? Who would care? No, a deep sense of protective privacy came over me. I got rid of many more than I thought I would. I enjoyed them, they had their moment in my life - now it's time to let them go.

Last year I crashed a Halloween party of this guy I was having a fling with; it was the perfect chance to check out his lover. So "Franchesca" was born - part Italian whore, part nasty circus showgirl, and 100% flawless. My first foray into drag was no secret. My

sister helped me with makeup and I made sure to show the pictures to my mother for semi-shock value. As beautiful of a costume as it was with it's blue sequins, leopard print, black veils, fishnets and fringe, I finally tossed her last week. Actually my mother tossed her - I was so anemic before my blood transfusion last week, that I couldn't even empty my own garbage. I'm sure my mom had no idea she was tossing "Franchesca" in the trash - where she deserved to rest in peace.

My brother David doesn't know this yet, but his favorite painting of mine, the one that hangs over his couch, the one I did when I was in art school when I was twenty, the one I could never stand, is soon to be history. I have left so many fine examples of my various artistic voices for my friends and family, and this painting is not one of them.

David would end up keeping it on his wall for another fifteen years just because I died. But soon, in the most sneakiest of ways, that painting will forever be part of art history. I told him I'd like it back because I have no examples of my own work in my apartment. You can't argue with a dying man, I like to say.

Letting go of things is wonderfully cathartic. You make a refreshing statement to yourself. It is also a move that shows great care and respect to

those left behind. Of course these things will never have as much meaning to anyone else but you. In fact, to others, they can rekindle sadness and grief.

Leave the best parts of you - the joyous memories of who you were as a loving person, prime photos, examples of your best papers - and toss the rest. Because if you don't do it, someone else will. And why should you put your family through any more surprises? It's been hard enough for them to deal with your trashy life all these years without rubbing their noses in it



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# My False Pride Was Hard To Swallow

APRIL 27, 1994

**A**n odd fact occurred to me recently. Four of my closest friends, people who have been there for me in grounded, down-to-earth ways, have something sad in common - they've all buried their mothers after lengthy illnesses.

In their company, there's no dramatic outbursts, no calling upon the deity for help, no hand wringing or helpless sighs. They simply have a knack for being a comforting presence and project a healthy acceptance of what is going on. Other well-meaning younger souls unintentionally undermined the work I've done on accepting my illness by suggesting that everything is how it always was - when, in fact, how it always was is how it will never be again.

Today I'm going to get waspish about a bee in my bonnet. I have a so-called friend who scampers away and hides every time I get sick, despite my weary attempts to bring him back into my life. He thinks that reading about my illness every week is enough and the sicker I get, the less likely he is to call.

He waits for things to be "all better" before he rings me up

with a cheery hello. Last month I went out of my way to help him work through his issues over abandoning me! Here I was, sick as a dog, concocting some irrational excuse to get him off the hook for turning his back on me after we've been so close. Yeah, close to the end of this flimsy friendship.

Tragically, he tested positive himself this year. To his credit, he's become a instant compendium of information on holistic approaches to healing - the wisest thing you can do in the beginning. Sometimes he amazes me. If only he wasn't so damn wise, cool, and collected, I would have dumped him long ago. Unfortunately, I think my recent illness as been an affront to his fragile world of hope. Avoiding me seemed to be as much as he could handle.

Okay, I admit it - I'm still upset over this whole mess even though I've slapped on my spiritual happy face. But I must strike a more lenient outlook on this for my own peace of mind; I can't let this fester. Sure, I'm disappointed with his cool response to my dilemma, but I'm not going to let it ruin one more precious day.

Some people, by the blessing of fate, have not had the kind of twisted life I've had which has

enabled me to regard AIDS as a piece of cake - ants and all. Lucky them. But then just admit it. Say you can't handle it. Don't tell me you're praying for me or having masses said for me. Excuse me, but there is nothing Christian about turning your back on a terminally ill friend. A simple phone call twice a month will do nicely, thank you.

The last time we talked, he's regarded me more as a science project than an old friend by asking me too many technical questions about my medication and the diameter of my KS lesions. He can spend a whole Saturday afternoon in some fanciful card shop in the Castro, picking out just the right get well card, but he can't seem to make that simple call. Maybe he's tired of hearing the disappointment in my voice when he asks me one more question about the results of my latest stool culture.

I've since learned that you are only going to get from people what they are willing to give, not what you think you might need. My friend has his own valid issues to work out. Maybe this incident is something he's created to broaden his own emotional base. Our awkward tale may be more his story than

mine. He may stand to benefit from all this long after I'm dead and cremated.

As long as learning is taking place for someone, I'm easily placated. My higher self doesn't need the aggravation - even though my lower self clearly gets off on the occasional spray of the poison pen. Unfortunately for you, this fifth draft has watered down the venom to a mere bitter aftertaste. Fortunately for me, I've revived a friendship that was simply suffering from a case of the chills.

Eerily, during the course of writing this article, he called from out of the blue! His t-cells must have been burning! I am so glad he called because we resolved everything in a deeply heart-felt way. I forgot how much I truly care for him.

This is the embarrassing truth: I've been the one who's avoided him. I'm still in shock - even angry - that he tested positive, despite a millions precautions. I listened helplessly to his pain during those first dark months of diagnosis. It's hard for me to admit that I have emotional limitations these days and can't offer anyone but myself my usual rousing brand of pep talk. What the hell kind of friend have I been for him?

But what really upsets me, of course, is now that he's called and we've resolved everything, I have to clean up this article, say some nice things about him, and cut out all those great bitchy lines! Damn!



**The last time we talked, he's regarded me more as a science project than an old friend by asking me too many technical questions about my medication and the diameter of my KS lesions.**

# Cheap Glamour Nearly Cost My Life

MAY 4, 1994

**T**he past is more glamorous in the retelling, unless I'm telling it, then I spare no seamy detail even if it incriminates my character. I'm sure you've figured out by now that I've made quite a career out of being a character.

AIDS forever altered my career path, with it's potholes, detours and dead-ends. For the past ten years I was on the run from HIV, yet all that dodging and darting netted me quite a collection of careers I may have missed along another path.

In the mid-eighties I whipped together a master's degree in film production and hot-tailed it down to Hollywood and somehow landed a job on the back lot of Paramount Studios. Yes, I jumped ship. San Francisco was a ghost town and my friends were fast becoming its ghosts. If I didn't get out soon I'd die from one form of death or another.

Being the ambitious slut - uh, career upstart that I was, I had my share of secret afternoon trysts with wannabe

producers. I needed the diversion because I had the worse job on the lot: microfilming all day, on a rattly, high-pitched machine, in a tiny windowless room with a gay, sixty-five year old drunk who'd wear the same piss-stained plaid pants a week in a row.

The fun part was making deliveries across the lot in a golf cart. Paramount's old backlot had long since burnt down but during that hot, sticky summer, a massive wooden frame a block long was erected, in fact it was supposed to be a block - a gritty, down and dirty city block. Everyday I'd watch them put the realistic finishing touches on the facade of this eerie replica of a street in New York's Lower East Village, birdshit, broken windows, hydrants and all.

For two years I tried to transfer to different departments but my degree worked against me - bosses wanted workers, not film students. I couldn't let go of the studio perks: star-sightings, sneak previews, tickets to tapings and all that damn movie making magic! To slap

myself awake from this ridiculous predicament, I decided to finally get tested.

When the results came back, I was thrown in a stupor. For a week, I'd visit that New York set and sit on the stoop of a fake brownstone, thinking about my one-time best friend Tom, now dead. We lived together on East 14th Street in such a place. I reflected on my life as a Manhattan man-chaser, and that tiny, ominous item buried in the back pages of the New York Times. It told me to get the hell out of town and go back home to my family before all hell breaks loose.

I asked Tom to forgive me for leaving him, even though he was struggling with a mysterious infection that wouldn't heal. In a daze of sadness amidst the surreal setting, I looked up at a second story window, with it's fake curtains flapping in the dry Santa Ana winds. I saw Tom peek out, wink and salute me. I was just beginning my battle while he had already won his.

I quit that awful job, and pursued a longtime goal - I became a teacher, a substitute teacher for L.A. Unified - I

needed to do something VERY real. You haven't lived until you get that eight a.m. phone call from a gang-plagued school in East L.A., jump in your old Mercury Comet in the thick of rush hour traffic and realize you have no idea where you're going - but you feel so alive!

Nothing made me forget my diagnosis more than teaching. I didn't care that I was low on the list and ended up with the jobs no one wanted: teaching blind and disabled kids, autistic kids, non-English speaking kids, violent kids or that inner city kid who had lived in a cardboard box under the freeway and made me a card at the end of the day thanking me for being so nice. You see, I haven't always been a bitter, haggard-out AIDS bitch. I used to be nice, goddamn it!

One day I'll tell you the truly sordid tale of how I got a job as a fifth grade teacher at a wonderful Catholic School. My kids loved me because I was so REAL with them, and their honesty added much to the quality of my life. I wrote them last year and told them I have AIDS. A month later I

received a large envelope filled with beautiful, funny, inspiring letters of hope and good cheer which I still read from time to time when I could use some good cheer.

At a recent reading I did of my work, I met some wonderful people who said they sent me get well cards. I had to be honest: I haven't received a piece of mail from a reader since December. I never go into the office, which can be hectic; I fax my work in. Things get lost, tossed, shuffled around. But I acknowledge every piece of mail as a professional courtesy, providing there's a return address, with at least a postcard of thanks. If you never received that from me, I never received your mail. But please try again, it gets a little creepy up here all alone in my fake Tower of Gloom set! Believe me, a card or note will do wonders for this sick boy.

# I Just Found A Lump In My Throat

MAY 11, 1994

**S**ome mornings I have to apply full stage make-up in bed before I can crawl to the bathroom mirror and see what's left. Today, while brushing and flossing, I noticed a lump in my throat. And now I'm flossing as fast as I can.

Our news editor sent me a letter telling me how much he enjoys my work. But he was really fishing for a photo he could run - he heard I was a handsome guy. Ha! But in these days of diminishing compliments, I bought it - hook, line and sinker and ran down to the office waving that stale old headshot from yesteryear.

My first column appeared in the parade issue last June. When *Sentinel* publisher Ray Chalker suggested the idea of a photo back then, I balked - it seemed too smarmy for the nineties. Ray and I have always had a professional relationship. All I have to do is sit on his desk, cross my legs, bat my eyes and he agrees. Or is that cross my

eyes and hit his desk with a bat? Whatever.

Readers, let's not forget, I was box office poison those first months. Long lashes or not, Ray came close to giving me the ax. Letters to the editor didn't help. There was one that ran under the heading, "AIDS Foundation Wants De Andreis Silenced"- regarding my article, "The Worried-Well Can Go to Hell;" one hard-boiled letter titled, "Give Him the Pink Slip;" and the following rotten egg from an anonymous reader, although I think it's from my mother:

"After reading another of Robert De Andreis' pitiful articles I need to respectfully ask that you stop running this embarrassing, sad column. I'd also like to ask that if any of your staff is close to Mr. DeAndreis that you do a loving intervention to help him with his problem. I do believe that most of us are reading these drunken diatribes shaking our heads at the foolish, dishonest babbling of a man in desperate need of spiritual/mental counseling. Please drop these vicious, destructive articles and find someone who is

radical, sharp, real and caring..." Ouch!

In all fairness to the *Sentinel* and the recent confusion over misplaced readers' mail, I kindly asked Ray not to send or print letters like that again. I wasn't interested in wasting my time engaging in negative dialogue. So I never got any mail because in the beginning it was almost all nasty and I didn't need it. And, yes, it hurt.

Those first several articles WERE crude and tasteless - but never dishonest. They truly reflected my cocky attitude towards the disease at the time. I had been asymptomatic for years and felt somehow immune from it all. But there was an honesty in my disrespect - I was thumbing my nose, not picking it.

On Monday I was feeling sun-shiney fresh and flawless so I ventured down to the *Sentinel*. I had my friend, a U.S. Postal Inspector, wait outside; it was time to solve this missing mail caper. With a microphone hidden in my shoulder pads, my surprise visit did net me a few stray letters. But it was all innocent

clerical errors - no arrests were made!

One letter was from a one-time poison pen writer, Sam Mather, who now tells me: "Don't let your legacy be lost to a garbage chute or dusty attic. You matter in this life, and your affairs should remain intact. Healthy, positive action is required here, because our parents or heirs may misinterpret the importance of keeping our legacies intact or misjudge how valuable our memories of each other really are..." That's when I first noticed the lump in my throat.

I received something from a reader that shocked me. I was so overwhelmed by his act of generosity, I found another lump on my lump. A decent sort of fellow would have returned it without batting an eye. But, hey, that's what eyes are for. Instead, I used it to buy myself a whole new outfit at the Gap! It made me feel young again - it's been a long time since I took a hundred bucks from a stranger!

False modesty section: I received some beautiful letters from you guys - I had no idea you were so into my stuff. I

got all -gulp!- choked up by their sincerity. After I read them, I felt like I should write more gently, with kindness and care. Then I thought, "Screw them if they can't take a joke!"

Now, about that headshot - no, smartass, I don't still look like that, it's more like this: take a pencil and draw some lines under the eyes. Shade in a gaunt look. Erase that tired eighties hair-do. Now take a red pencil and draw in a few KS lesions and you get the idea. But don't touch that smile - it hasn't changed in years.



# Frankly, My Dear, I Don't Give A Damn

MAY 18, 1994

**S**ecrets are like toxins and must be purged by confessing, preferable to someone who'll be shocked by them. No such luck with this *Sentinel* crowd. I just hope my folks don't get their hands on this one

When I was a kid, I was fascinated with *Gone With the Wind* and one of its lead characters - and, no, it wasn't Mammy. Maybe it's because I've since learned that Vivian Leigh was bi-polar, or maybe it's because Scarlet was an inspiring role model for any vixen trying to survive the demise of a once flourishing subculture, forever lost - never to return this way again.

If you are a gay man still talking about the glories of gay yesterday, you are not only tired, you are well into middle age. It's over! - get a grip. It's ancient history. You blame AIDS for pulling the rug out from under your party, but let's face it, you got old, your friends died, and you're still flipping through photo albums of dead people. It's springtime, for christsake, get a new life.

My favorite scene in *Gone With the Wind* besides all that face slapping, is at the end of the first act before intermission when Scarlet is on that hillside digging in the dirt for something to eat. She pulls out a carrot, takes a bite and barfs. The camera pulls back, she clenches her fist in silhouette and says: "When this war is over, as God is my witness, I will never go hungry again." Then the audience shuffles out for popcorn and carrots.

Witness or not, AIDS is a war without end - painful memories of beautiful lives cut short will never end. What's the deep-rooted AIDS message in all this? Although eating fresh carrots is an excellent source of beta-carotene, AIDS vegetables like myself must be especially careful about washing anything that is grown in the ground. There are dangerous microorganisms in the soil that can cause havoc with your health. Always use soap and water before putting any carrot-like objects in your mouth.

Like Scarlet, scarfing and barfing for survival, I panicked two years ago when my finances fell apart after a

disability leave. All the part-time jobs I applied for jeopardized my disability income. In a heart-pumping, adrenaline rush of desperation I called up one of those phone sex ads that lets "models and escorts list free," and left my number on the line!

What the hell am I doing, I thought, as the taxi sped to the guy's house. He never asked me my status and we never did anything unsafe - and that was just with the cab driver! But if you've ever been a member of the sexual underground, you know it wasn't for the money - it was for the thrill. This adventure gave me something to tell my friends. They stopped calling when I recovered from sexual addiction because they missed my nasty stories.

In another tawdry episode of desperate living on disability, I found myself driving in a trance to a downtown gay porn theater where a trick, Ric, was performing and managing. I wanted to check out his act and see if he could offer me an under the table gig. I sat in the dark as he did his greasy number. When it came time to collect tips, he came down into

the audience, spied me and dragged me on stage where we put on a live show of our own. We could have been arrested! The only job I ended up getting got from Ric was a blow job.

In the heat of my fevers two months ago, when I was rattling on death's door, I foolishly over-purged my files. Today, by the miracle of prayer or pact with the devil, I look and feel amazingly fresh - the weight is back, I'm sporting a healthy glow, and I'm in complete denial about my deteriorating health! Like a mood-swinging maniac preparing to meet his maker, I threw away my little black book! I'm seeing a therapist now to see if, under hypnosis, I can recall some of those hot phone numbers. In the meantime, the most exercise I'm getting these days is climbing the walls.

Accepting your past does wonders for the soul, even if you don't understand why you had to endure pain and sadness. Even if you had been incarnated into a different life, you still would have had your share. As you draft plans for your next lifetime on the planet

- shoot for the moon. But if you end up with an assignment to the sexual underground, accept it with grace and dignity. God created whores, vixens and sluts for her own amusement and it's always wise to keep the gods amused.



**If you are a gay man STILL talking about the glories of gay yesterday, you are not only tired, you are well into middle age. It's OVER - get a grip.**



# Planet Earth Was A Big Let-Down

MAY 25, 1994

**You and I were born on the same day - when the Big Bang spit out the Earth and set it spinning. After a billion years of waiting in the wings, we burst on the scene as humans, only to have our sparkling lives cut short. Was it good for you?**

Let's face it, living on this planet isn't all it's cracked up to be. When I first read those soul travel brochure titles a millennium ago, Earth sounded so interesting - "Have You Considered Life as a Human?" "Explore the Mysteries of Human Nature" or the title that caught my eye - "Have Sex With a Thousand Guys" Bingo! I was sold. All this time in the cosmos was making me stir crazy. The only thing that concerned me was a warning on the last page "No one gets off this planet alive."

I wasn't sure what that meant so I asked my ex, an obsessive entity who can't get me out of his molecules. "What?" I recoiled in shock, "Humans have a finite life span?" Well that answers that. No Earth for me. This entity

and I have been in love for a million years. He said if I ever left the cosmos, he would incarnate into a virus, enter my bloodstream and kill me himself if he had to - just to bring us together again. Looks like I'll be seeing him soon.

This limited life span idea began to intrigue me. The way I figured, Earth could be a playground if you knew how to work it. You could run around and have fun, do whatever you like and split; no million year long-term commitments, no grueling experience of eternity, no itchy impatience to change form - being human was starting to sound fun. What do I have to lose - besides my life?

Your true identity is put away in the back files - hard as hell to access. You practically have to take your mind apart, thought by thought, to begin to remember who you really are. But memory plays tricks on you, becomes distorted over time, and is useless when it comes to living in the moment. Many beings incarnated as human fall for the empty distractions of the world, and walk out of here not learning a thing. The only thing they

manage to do is obliterate any memory of their higher selves and are usually incarnated back as mold or mildew.

Everything was going fine. I was born, had my little life, and now I'm getting ready to die - no big deal; I knew that was going to happen from the start. I don't care what my long-term entity said, he did NOT incarnate into the HIV virus. I chose it myself. I figured if I was going to have to die anyway, I might as well die in my prime from the most popular disease on the planet, kick back and enjoy the deterioration process. It was either that or old age. Besides, you don't get all this love and support if you die of anything else. AIDS is really the best way to go nowadays.

Everything was going well - my t-cells hit bottom, I lost my job, my friends started to pull back, and I started getting that haunting AIDS look around the eyes. Okay, this is going to be smooth sailing, just get me the hell out of here with a minimum of agony and isolation. But some requests fall on deaf ears, no matter how good your karma is.

Something started to happen recently that is

screwing the whole thing up. I'm starting to fall in love again with the planet and the idea of being human. It's pulling me apart. I want to experience on more time all the things I loved about being alive - falling asleep in the arms of a beautiful man, long walks through this beautiful city, the laughter I conjured up with my friends. I'm not ready to say good bye.

Yes, my bags are backed. I might be around for a year or two at the most, but I'm closing up shop. I going to miss the hell out of this place - the vast beauty, the glorious souls, and the early morning when everything is fresh again. Oh God, give me just a little more time.

Damn, I'm starting to cry. Can't I have one more night with a man, one more day of feeling alive, one more chance to love again? No, there's no turning back. I'll fall apart if I have to look back. Please let me go without missing this place. Why do I still have to go through the dying process? When's this whole damn thing going to end? Oh God, take me quietly into the night.

Earth was a big let-down for me. She stirs you up,

makes you fall for her earthly delights, then kicks you off just when you're getting the hang of it. As you get ready to pack your bags sometime in your life, remember - unlike you, this planet is not going to be around forever. Besides, there are more enlightened places to hang out in the universe. But never stop incarnating; extend love with each of your endless lives. We'll all see each other again someday, I'm sure of it, but the wait may seem like an eternity.



**Can't I have one more night with a man, one more day of feeling alive, one more chance to love again? ...Please let me go without missing this place.**

ROBERT De ANDREIS

# We're on a Road to Nowhere

JUNE 1, 1994

**S**omedays I want to get out of town. The urge to run away is overwhelming - as if it were even possible. I want to hop in a car with a wild, positive guy and blow the lid off the rest of my life.

Several weeks ago I had the worst health crisis of my life. My parents asked, "Buried or cremated?" It was such a close call I'm still rattled. Somehow, I recovered completely. I feel great, I'm full of energy and walk two miles a day; I sleep soundly and eat a very healthy diet - not to mention all the new pills I take to stay alive. I don't believe in miracles, except when they happen to me.

At the time, it never occurred to me that I would recover. I always thought I'd be a hardy AIDS trooper, but when my body fell apart from infections and toxic drugs, I distinctly remember wanting to die. I thought things would just get worse. What happened to my usual optimism? It shocked me that I was willing to throw in the towel so quickly. It's over for now, I have to block it out of my memory in order to go on. But

there is one thing I can't forget - my disdain and fury over my total dependence on my ragtag team of caregivers.

We never formally mapped out a plan before I got sick so when I started to fall apart, no one was prepared emotionally. I'd get these wide-eyed sympathy stares from them as they brought over their cold bowls of soup. I feel like an asshole for complaining about any of the help I got, but no one brought me flowers. Aren't you suppose to bring sick people flowers? Doesn't AIDS count anymore?

It would have been wonderful to have an intimate partner advocating for me, holding my hand, protecting me from my worst thoughts, but it didn't happen that way. My ex, Bob, came back from Chicago and is still fence-sitting about moving back. All the old feelings were stirred up again - good and bad. The myth of "The Return of the Ex" is a bunch of crap. I let it go, but oh how I wanted it all to work out.

I want to drive off with dignity. I want to hop in a car with a wild guy and do one last hard drug binge. We'll throw our medicine out the window, one pill at a time and screw the rest. It sure beats rotting in a

hospital bed waiting for a nurse to pull the sheet over your head.

Who am I kidding? No one's working on a cure for someone in my condition, but I thank you activist guys for demanding it just the same. That's sweet of you but let's get real: no one's working on a magic bullet for someone in my state. It's not going to happen or I would have heard about it by now. Things are never going to be the way they were. There's just no scrubbing this KS off my face. It's not going to all magically disappear someday.

Maybe that's why I woke up at four in the morning in an AIDS panic and did something I've never done before. I reached for the phone to call the AIDS/HIV Nightline (434-AIDS) but directory assistance gave me a "900" by mistake and I have a block on my phone. I slammed the phone down in a Barbara Stanwick snit, it was so *Sorry, Wrong Number*.

Sometimes, in the middle of the night, death comes into focus and seems so real. Yes, Robert, you are going to die. But get over it, it's just death and you've got a lot more AIDS bitching to do. You can dress AIDS up with a red ribbon, throw the AIDS Quilt over her shoulders, give to the lavish

AIDS-a-thon of your choice but it's always going to be about death - that's what you're terrified of, admit it. Shout it out! Say: "I'm terrified." "Death freaks me out," or "I'm too hung to die." There, now don't you feel better?

I still have brief moments when I freak out about dying despite all the introspection I've done. But the panic doesn't last long and it usually unblocks part of my mind. I feel alive, creative and full of energy AFTER I've allowed myself to fully experience the terror of death. It's like getting a colonic - all that dead, putrid material is finally washed away. You ought to try it sometime, it's very refreshing.

But I'm still full of mischief. Last night I had the urge to go out and make some human contact. Instead, being the washed-up old party girl that I am, I got all dressed and up but fell asleep instead. I woke up at four in the morning, bundled up and went to a local cruising spot. I figure if I'm there, there's got to be some other idiot there too.

We spied each under cover of darkness and I followed him into the shadows, like a predator driven by instinct. These moments of danger and passion

are mystical rites guided by forces beyond our grasp.

Anyone who tells you he has hot tricks all the time is lying. This guy was average but willing and able. We hugged and he kissed me first. I thought I had forgotten how. We safely embraced. It was a mystic moment of transcendental healing, except when I came first, zipped up and split leaving him high and dry. I have AIDS, for goodness sakes, I need my rest. I can't be waiting all night for some trick to shoot his load. Yes, I felt like an asshole for ditching this "mystical moment." But on my way home I had a stunning revelation from God: "It's okay to be an asshole once in awhile, no matter how spiritual you think you are".



ROBERT De ANDREIS

# Get Your Afternoon Affairs in Order

JUNE 8, 1994

**S**omehow I always end up spending Sundays by myself, which is okay unless you're me - then you can freak yourself out by conjuring up new AIDS melodrama just to have something to write about.

This afternoon, I planned to attend a reading by Charles Caufield, former *Sentinel* writer, as he read from his book, *The Anarchist AIDS Medical Formulary: A Guide to Guerrilla Immunology*. I walked down the hill to the Castro and had some time to kill so I checked out some AIDS material at Crown Books. "When Someone You Know Has AIDS - A Practical Guide" caught my eye. Maybe I can find something fun for a

column, I thought. But as I flipped through it I was overcome with emotion. It was all there - practical guidelines for the "carepartners", from preventing bed sores to handling elimination issues, so clinical, so cut and dry. It was like reading about my life on fast forward. The chapter on the various diseases made me light-headed spinning that wheel of misfortune - CMV? MAI? PCP? It's going to land on something sooner or later. The tone - so professional and ordered - freaked me out, I wanted to scream. How can they write so calmly about something so deadly? All of a sudden, my cool and collected AIDS self lost it. I tried to get a hold of myself but couldn't.

I started crying right there in the bookstore! I turned my head so no one would see. I prayed that my phony blue contact lenses wouldn't pop out. I took a few deep breathes and stood there paralyzed. I staggered over to over to A *Different Light Bookstore*, where Charles was about to read from his fabulous new book. But I was on AIDS overload. They were playing a Karen Carpenter song and I thought - oh how innocent the world was not so long ago. I bolted out of there before he started, trying to fool myself into thinking my foot was asleep, instead of the

peripheral neuropathy I know it is.

I couldn't calm down so I walked. I walked for a long time under overcast skies. Damn, I thought, when the hell are these anti-depressants going to kick in? It's been three weeks now. Just then I thought I saw my friend Doug. Then I remembered - Doug is dead.

A horn honked, I turned around and it was Brad, driving his spiffy Porsche. I hadn't seen him since New Year's and he was still hot in all the right places. Boy, did we have fun afternoons while his lover was at work - doing it on a bed, of all places. I told him I was positive right up front, especially after he told me he was a lawyer.

He said he hadn't been tested which was followed by a semi-convincing argument for the case of ignorance, which I almost bought because of his sunny disposition. I make it a policy never to lecture tricks on testing so I let it go, despite my belief in early intervention.

His attitude was, "If I found out I was positive, I wouldn't take AZT anyway. Besides, if I'm positive, the stress of finding out would be bad for my health. Also, I'd be less incline to fool around with guys like you." Yeah, whatever - all foolhardy responses. But he was so glad to see me and said I looked great which is true - for the time being. He

stopped reading my column when I wrote about my bouts of illness in vivid detail. Then he stopped picking up the *Sentinel* because he was afraid I wouldn't be in it anymore. Oh, please - I make half that stuff up anyway.

I jumped in his car and he took me out to dinner. As I politely stirred my bowl of swampy brown soup, he turned to me and said, "Robert, I tested positive three weeks ago." My heart sank. No, please, not this guy. He had lost twenty-five pounds since I last saw him. I was awash with empathy and compassion - two of my favorite roles; so sincere, so concerned - you get the idea. We were sitting too close, it was all too intimate, the only thing I could think of was - gee, I hope I don't have any food in my teeth. He learned about his status and his double-digit t-cells after he couldn't knock out a parasite. My goodness, I hope it wasn't one of mine! We swapped diarrhea horror stories like "They Came From Planet Crypto" and "Creature From the Brown Lagoon," while I discreetly checked my teeth in the reflection of a butter knife.

I told him about the protocols I followed from two books that finally knocked it out after several months of unsuccessful tests and treatments. I didn't want to inundate him with a barrage of information but he was at

square one with an AIDS treatment plan. I make it a policy never to advocate a specific treatment or protocol, but these two books worked wonders for my recovery. They are *Immune Power* by Jon Kaiser, MD and *The Aids Control Diet* by Mark Konlee.

He wrote these titles on a napkin, but later inadvertently blew his nose with it. I hope he can still read them. He's very concerned about his will and making sure his lifetime lover gets it all, not his relatives. His attitude about everything is "I'll deal with it as it comes." It works for him, but would drive me up the wall. As he drove me home he said he had been thinking about me alot. I told him to call and keep me posted. "We should get together and fool around one of these day - now that we don't have to be so careful," I said.

"My lover's going to be out of town all next month, I'll definitely call you," he said.

"I'll look forward to that." Something clicked between us. I hopped out of his car and noticed I was getting a hard-on. What is it about HIV positive men that always turns me on?

ROBERT De ANDREIS

# We Are As God Created Us

JUNE 15, 1994

**When bad things happen to good people it makes us stronger, especially if we have a forgiving heart. Have you forgiven God yet for throwing this twisted disease in your face?**

Let's face it, sometimes God's an asshole. He creates us gay, according to the latest thinking, then plops us down in a homophobic world. How rude! On top of that, just when we were making inroads into our liberation, he poisons us with a deadly virus. That evil bitch!

But that's lowball metaphysics, isn't it? The higher road is to realize that your illness is meaningless. Disease belongs to the natural kingdom, along with spiders and snakes. We impose value on neutral things to give the world a sense of meaning. Does a spider think it's being punished because it caught a deadly fungus? Does a snake think it's been bad because a scorpion ate its young? So why do you think you're getting personally screwed by

God? You can't take AIDS seriously, it's just a deadly virus. Besides, we are not our bodies, they belong to this earth, subjected to laws of decay, unlike our glorious selves.

You can pump is up, toast it with a tan, have it nipped, tucked and tattooed, but it's still not who you are. Despite evidence to the contrary, you are not your body. Your body serves your soul. By itself, it's nothing but a bag of bones. Our gay subculture is obsessed with appearance. We ascribe value to bulky torsos, big baskets, or a flawless face. This is perfectly fascist, no one has a perfect anything. As we say in AIDS-land, even the buffed boys die, they just go out in larger coffins.

I don't have AIDS, my body has AIDS. My soul isn't sick, in fact it's very healthy these days. It's not marked with KS, my personality doesn't have neuropathy, my sense of humor isn't infected. I have a healthy detachment from my weakening body which has greatly strengthen my soul. Don't cry over your failing health. They'll be other bodies, other lifetimes. AIDS is not the end of the world.

Don't get me wrong, it's still a vicious nightmare, but I certainly don't take it personally. In the larger scheme of things, I don't know why I have it, and neither do you. AIDS is a mystery, much like the elusive cure. I'm not looking for the metaphysical meaning in my disease anymore, I'm just trying to get through this day. I wake up every morning and tell myself I'm doing a great job and my AIDS-pride keeps me going all day long.

I do what I can to protect myself. I've learned to enjoy solitude - my phone doesn't ring, I hardly see friends, I take long walks and hot baths. My home is quiet, I never play music, I love the silence. Maybe I live in an AIDS bubble, but it keeps me alive. I finally enjoy the presence of my own company. My self-esteem just tested positive because I'm proud of the way I've met each impossible day. I haven't fallen apart, I've met this thing head on, I can handle anything now.

I don't know why AIDS hit the planet but I have seen what it's brought out in people: the acts of bravery and courage, the depth of love and support

we've shown in our ranks. If the world knew what a kind and compassionate people we are, it would salute us, not persecute us.

You have an obligation to develop your spirituality. Give something back, especially if you inadvertently killed someone with the virus. Become a healing force in our midst, there're lots of positions still open. Some people have been absolute angels. That's because we've been visited by powerful souls who have come to the planet, joined our ranks, even contracted this virus, in order to help us heal this slow burning hell - people just like you.

Ah, the healing power of the human touch - a hearty hug, an affectionate pat, an emphatic grasp. Don't be scared of hugging too hard, it's not possible. The Center for Disease Control says you can't get cooties from hugging. Embrace your friend, make him laugh, and you'll see the color return to his face. Have you hugged your AIDS survivor today?

It angers me when they say AIDS is not a gay disease. AIDS will always be a gay disease. Just remember their

names. Those early deaths were the saddest but they led the way. You think you've lost so many but you haven't, nobody's left you, you've just lost your faith.

It's time to get on with the rest of your life. Go out despite your weight loss, take morning walks, call a thrift store and have them pick up the rest of your lover's things. Take off that black Jackie O hat and veil. Keep that eternal flame lit but walk away in peace. He's never coming back because he never really left.

His eternal soul can't be scattered like ashes, it remains in your heart until the end of time. Sit for a moment in silence and you will hear his message from beyond the grave, "Practice safe sex, for God's sake, always tell your partner you're positive BEFORE you touch him, which I regret I never did. This place is hell, and let me tell you something, the devil is a real bitch."

ROBERT De ANDREIS

# That's Why The Lady is a Tramp

JUNE 29, 1994

**I've been a whore most my life, picking up guys by the hundreds over the past twenty years, AIDS or no AIDS. I will be looking at these sticky issues for the next few weeks so fasten your seat belt, it's going to be bumpy ride.**

My story is not uncommon, it could easily be yours. I've decided to exhume my past to see if there is any evidence of foul play. I was born here so when I came out nearly twenty years ago, all I had to do was walk down to Polk Street, hop in a car, and make some money. If a drag queen trashed me I'd sharpen my claws on her face. I didn't go to proms or pep rallies, I was a teenage hustler living at home, tip-toeing in at six in the morning, looking for Quaaludes to come down from speed. When I was sixteen, a gay teacher gave me my first hit of acid and a copy of John Rechy's *City of Night*.

That summer he told me I had street value and taught me how to hustle while a parade of his friends came over to paw me. I'll never know if I was a true whore or a victim of

circumstance, but something sure turned my sex life into a side show. We were programmed with the mantra, "Look good, feel good, play hard, stay hard," and to question our morality was the only taboo.

If I started dating, I quickly tired of the kind of sex we'd end up having - you know, that tender crap you see in the movies. The only sex I was interested in was from another kind of movie - the kind of sex you could only have once with a stranger. The first time he's a trick, the second time he's a date and the third time he's tired because it's never as good as the first time.

I screwed up my intimacy issues with all that contact. It became impossible for me to get close to anyone. Doesn't that sound familiar? It annoys me that I finally release myself from all this at the very last second of my life. Why not five years ago when I could have remarried and had someone around today to hold my hand?

I've been reluctant to write about this because it hurts too much and I'm still healing from it. The real truth is that if I still had my car, put on a few

more pounds, and didn't have this damn KS on my face, I'd STILL be out there getting it. Thank God for a little KS.

I want to die at peace with my past and forgive myself for any moral transgressions. I have tremendous issues around the healing of my sexual history. I'm finally willing to confront my culpability in the AIDS crisis. For years I was more a part of the problem than the solution. This is so painful to admit, let alone publish, but I need to open the windows and let the bats fly out.

I can't begin to heal until I admit to what I've done yet I'd be outraged to be lectured on the moral turpitude of my behavior; I'm strong enough these days to confront it myself. The only finger you have a right to point is the one you point at yourself. By my own standards I acted immorally, screwing myself over and putting the lives of others at risk. This as not a judgment against sex, it's a judgment against a part of me. I did things that harmed sensitive parts of my higher self. For me, there is something intrinsically immoral about self-destruction

and destructive acts towards others. Why did I burn off that part of my soul that could have granted me the comfort of intimacy during this difficult stretch of life? Why didn't anyone rescue me from my worst side? Why didn't anyone take my shivering soul off the street, make me a cup of tea, and tucked me in under a warm blanket? Because knights in shining armor are closet codependents.

I'm not afraid of the dark, my shadow side was a shortcut to higher ground. You can light a golden candle and chant your affirmations but AIDS is from the dark side. Are healing rituals ancient witchcraft and chants their incantations? If I didn't contract AIDS I wouldn't be writing to you, I'd be standing in front of a chalkboard explaining fractions to a bunch of fifth graders, paper airplanes and all.

I don't think I could have intense sex again, it brings back too much pain. Today I am repelled by mindless dog-slurping sex, I read those nasty personal ads and feel at peace with myself because of all the work I've done around my addiction. There was a time

when I couldn't pick up a gay rag for fear of being triggered by all the sexual imagery, but now I read the *Sentinel* and focus on its comprehensive AIDS coverage, even though I don't always agree with the guy who writes that HIV commentary!

Today, when I see my favorite sexual type on the street, I smile but never look back. I'm at peace with myself and now see the light of his being, not just his body, and that light casts out the shadows of my streetwise soul.

**Why did I burn off that part of my soul that could have granted me the comfort of intimacy during this difficult stretch of life?**

ROBERT De ANDREIS

# One Good Slap Deserves Another

JULY 6, 1994

**M**y door bell rang the night before the parade. It was a surprise visit from one of my favorite tricks. He was the first openly positive guy that I was attracted to. Maybe that's why we always hit it off and see each other so rarely.

There is a freedom in having sex with a guy who has the same status as yourself. During that summer two years ago, we let our inhibitions down and acted out unexplored roles. I thought about him out of the blue the other day when I was at the lab for a CMV study I'm in, giving blood and filling a specimen jar. Don't ask me why he came to mind.

We talked about his last visit several months ago when he rang the bell at two in the morning stinking drunk. He said he was sorry and embarrassed. But I'm the one who needed to apologize, I did something that night which disappointed me so much I thought I'd never see him again. I told him I was sorry for shooting my load down his

throat even though he asked for it.

Before AIDS, guys did that all the time without thinking, but the crisis has changed our behavior. Today it's just taken for granted that you pull out before you shoot and jack it off yourself. The last time a guy shot in my mouth, I spit it back in his face!

I was shocked at myself for indulging his drunken request. It certainly wasn't done in the name of love. It disturbed me because I did it as an expression of contempt for him. He showed up drunk without calling first, he never returned my phone calls, and he's been an all around jerk for disregarding my humanity. Even though he has a lover, he could at least granted me some common courtesy. I could write the Great American Gay Novel, win the Nobel Peace prize and find a cure for AIDS, but he'd still only want one thing. Jeez, what does it take to be a real person around here?

Did I take advantage of his drunken state, act out my annoyance, and possibly re-infect him with a different

strain of a deadly virus just because he didn't call first?!

My goodness, it looks like I'm the real asshole. As I struggled with an apology, he said he didn't even remember and just laughed it off. I wish I could just laugh it off. It's frightening to see your true colors in the middle of the night.

He held my hand as the lights of the city lit our HIV positive bodies. When he started to take off my T-shirt, I hoped he didn't see the lesion on my shoulder, but he did and kissed it anyway. I told him I grew this goatee because I have a small KS lesion right above my lip. In that split second of silence, I prayed it wouldn't matter. He said, "Kiss me." I held his jaw in my hand and kissed him like he was the last person on Earth.

But then he asked me to spit in his face just like the old days! He wanted me to smack him around and pin him down the way I used to. He wanted me to grab the back of his head, yank it down and call him my bitch. He motioned for me to slap his face but I couldn't. I'm not that person

anymore. Can't we just lay here and hug instead?

The next morning my friend Jim came up from L.A. for the parade. We were putting the finishing touches on our outfits when the phone rang. It was my brother, David, telling me that our sister Kristen's water bag broke and she was at Kaiser Hospital in labor! I grabbed the keys to Jim's rent-a-car and drove to Kaiser all tan and spiffy. The last time I was here, I was sick as a dog coming in for a broncoscopy. The time before that I came by to visit Ed a few months before he died.

My mom came running out. "They can see the baby's head!" I was so happy but grossed out at the same time. Birth, like death, is messy. Later Kris told me that giving birth was like pushing a big cantaloupe out of her butt. "Push! Push! Push!" my sister, Yvette, was coaching her - then the piercing wail of a newborn. No, they don't slap them anymore. "It's a boy!" They wrapped him in a blanket and put him in my arms.

The nurse asked, "Cut or uncut?" Kris said, "Uncut, if he wants it done later he could

get it done himself." I recalled a vivid image: it took me several dates to get a hot guy in bed and I soon realized why. When the moment of truth arrived I shuddered, "What happened?" Poor guy had been circumcised as an adult and they botched it. I never called him back.

As a point of honor, Kristen gave her son the middle name of Robert but when she told me his first name, it was like a slap in the face - it was the same unusual first name as my drunken friend's! Higher powers can be so rude with their blessings in disguise. As I held this precious gift of life and called him by that name, I realized my friend was also innocent and his life was just as sacred.



ROBERT De ANDREIS

# Did I Infect My Ex ?

JULY 13, 1994

**S**ometimes the truth hurts like hell. I have tried many times to write this story but I always fall apart at the keyboard. As it is, I'm in tears right now and if I finish this it will be a miracle.

Time is running out, my doctor said I may have only six months to live. I need to get this off my chest once and for all but I can't stop crying, I don't know where to begin. I just grabbed a Kleenex and blew my nose. I need to pause for a moment, take a deep breath and say a prayer.

These feelings are so raw because I never had the strength to deal with them before. When I was twenty-four I felt I could do no wrong. I thought I could blow my brains out on Fire Island with my coke-dealing boyfriend and walk away scott free amidst rumors of a new gay cancer. I went haywire and landed in Bellevue trying to untangle a life gone awry. I fully recovered, moved back home, and started a master's program in film. But my real education was about to come from a stud named Bob.

We met on this very day, ten years ago, when we were both twenty-five. He was trying to kickstart his Honda Nighthawk when I walked by. Five minutes later I was riding on the back of his bike with my arms wrapped around his ripped stomach. An hour later we were taking a shower together after hot sex. He asked, "Are you married?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"Cuz I'd marry you." It was that simple, we became lovers on the spot. I had never been with a man who was built like Bob. I always thought they were out of my league, being the boyish fawn that I was. Since he liked lanky guys more than I liked beef, I had this catch in the palm of my hand.

He was a personal weight trainer with that classic Tom of Finland look. He was one of Tom's boys but didn't have a clue. I laughed when they called us Brutus and Olive Oil, but when they called him big and stupid, I winced. Bob had no use for my intellect and I was not impressed with his muscles. This forced us to connect beneath the surface where a deeper love could grow. By the end of our five years together he thanked me for helping him become a man and he taught me

more about love than he'll ever know.

The shallow truth is that I prized him as a trophy only because he was so hot. I told him he could be a star in the leather community because he looked flawless in leather, but he preferred a younger crowd. I never cared much for that gym body type and he sensed it on some level. I was the first person to love the man behind the muscles. I didn't fawn over him, it was the other way around.

I thought a lover would cure my sex addict blues but he just made it worse. He'd accuse me of running down to the bookstore for a blow job while he was out shopping for food. He'd come home and play "Penis Inspector," he'd pull out my dick to see if I just had sex. He'd fly into a rage if he tasted another man's spit on my dick then throw me over his knees and spank me! I was hardly the perfect wife.

He got off on the sordid tales of my sexual past and objectified me to the point of exhaustion. I got sick of him sucking me off morning, noon and night. I finally nabbed a lover after years of whoring only to have him treat me like a slut all over again.

He made me twist his nipples to the point of pain while he sucked me off. I hated doing it but he insisted. He showed me a sadistic side to myself I never knew existed and I hated him for that. Our sex life became a way for me to vent my rage at him for making me hurt him. Our lives spun out of control. I dropped out of school, we dealt drugs, picked up hustlers for three-ways and got nasty on speed.

It was 1984 and AIDS terror was in the air. Enough facts were known to indicate you could get it from screwing without a condom. So why did he insist I turn him over, spread his legs, and pound him every night until he bled? What the hell were we thinking, or were we thinking at all?

We shared moments of deep love and affection, respect and recovery. Unfortunately this came after we split up. Bob was never mean-spirited to anyone but I could be a vicious bitch. Yet somehow he's forgiven me for everything, even the unthinkable.

The moving van was double parked. He was packing the last of his things when I instigated such a volatile fight that he came within an inch of slugging me. Then he threw something

in my face that he's never repeated. In a fit of rage he spoke the unspeakable truth: he accused me of infecting him and cutting his life short. He said, "You dragged me through the mud of your soul and poisoned me for loving you."

It was so real, it stopped our fight cold. There was deadly silence and unbearable sorrow. I collapsed at his feet and wept because we both knew how true it really was. He knelt down to hold my trembling hand and kissed my forehead with forgiveness. In that moment of anguish and pure love I would have sold my soul to start our lives all over again.





# There is Nothing to be Afraid of

JULY 20, 1994

**L**ife and Death are eternal lovers whose courtship is the central force of the universe. Behind the mask of death is the face of God. It is the unknown that you fear. I have no answers, there will never be answers, there are things that we will never know.

The idea that I'm going to die soon excites me, it's like I'm packing for a trip, but instead of going to Tahoe, I'm going to Heaven. I hate it when people won't let me talk about my death. Do you know how emotionally crippling it is to stuff the feelings of the terminally ill? Yes, I'm terminally ill. I have AIDS and I'm going to die. I need to shout it from the rooftops, so no one can shut me up. I need to say it without being scolded. It's healing to shout the truth. I have a terminal disease, goddamn it! Do you know how much hard work it took to say that? I'm not giving up, I'm just getting real by learning to live the good death.

Some people hide behind hope; it becomes a way of avoiding the real work: reconciling your past, healing

relationships, letting others say goodbye, forgiving yourself, and finally letting go - in a most delightful way. If you think I'm throwing in the towel then YOU have a lot of issues to work out around death.

If you tell me not to give up hope, I won't dignify that with an answer. I'm also not going to go out of my way to coddle misperceptions by mentioning to you all the good things I'm doing for my health. If you were to meet me you would find me as open and full of life as I've always been, without a bitter scowl. Since I've been actively working on accepting death, I feel a clarity and a peace that has alluded me most of my life.

Often times, obsessive political activism, neurotic health regimes, and other noble venues are socially sanctioned ploys of avoidance. Believe me, honey, you're going to get a lot more support for dicing up a shitake mushroom than you will for processing your death issues.

I was going to say, "Of course I don't want to die..." But then I thought that, too, is a form of denial. If you thought about it, you would realize that it makes no difference when

you die. Your life isn't cut short, it's compressed. All the issues you would have dealt with years from now are squeezed into a shorter, more intense time frame. Longevity is vastly overrated, what would you gain spiritually by being around for another twenty years that you can't access right now? Wisdom is born of pain, not wrinkles. A longer life only means you collect more crap (Fiesta ware, et al.) do more things ("Let's remodel!"), and struggle with a ton of issues around growing old (denture odor). I think I'll pass.

One of the basic tenants of karmic law is that everything you need to get done in this lifetime you will get done. I thought of this a few weeks ago when I was indulging my human nature with the fear that I won't get to say all I need to say, that my life will be cut short and I will leave my readers dangling. No, it doesn't quite work that way. The universe will grant me exactly enough time to speak my peace. What a comforting thought that is.

I think it's cool to accept your own death. A local psychotherapist sent me a proposal for a program he's

putting together on accepting of death. He wanted my feedback because he found my attitudes around death to be healthy and refreshing. I screamed! It's the first time I've ever been solicited for anything. Well, maybe not the first time.

No one knows any more about death than you do. It is a spiritual fallacy to search for noble answers to the unknowable. Why don't you ponder something more practical, like your own mortality? All your fears around death are silly, it's not that big of a deal.

Living the good death is the last gift you can give to yourself. It is part of what we must go through on our AIDS journey. The most agonizing part of AIDS is not the physical pain, it's all those asymptomatic years of knowing you're going to die. Why don't you use that time wisely and prepare at a leisurely pace? It's one of the perks of having AIDS.

We are the trail blazers. In our own quiet way, when the world wasn't looking, we entered the dark corner of death and reinvented it. Even though AIDS may knock us

down in our prime, this has created a milestone in the history of death consciousness precisely because a whole generation of young, sharp minds have focused on it.

Death had been the domain of the elderly who had no desire to freshen up its stale concepts. The challenge is to reinvent it from a secular perspective. I am certainly charmed by old religions, but not their centuries of arrested development. It's time to flip death upside down and make it one of the most empowering experiences of your life!

The irony is that those who fully prepare for death actually live longer, happier lives. It's all those fear thoughts that send you to an early grave. But I'm ready and raring to go back to where I came from. Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home.



ROBERT De ANDREIS



# My Pills Are Making Me Sick

JULY 27, 1994

**I** was at MCC Church and couldn't believe my ears. During the part when people shout out prayers, this guy said, "I need some healing around something that happened. I've never laid a hand on anyone but yesterday I just beat up my best friend."

Of course, that someone was me. It took me hours to get out of bed today, I have a sore rib and a nasty yellow and purple bruise on my shin and a bunch of assorted small cuts. Of all the things I reveal about myself, this may be a little too real, and if I loose some readers because of this story, au revoir, baby.

I need to talk about this, because it would be a sin of omission to leave it out of this body of work that I have shared with you this year. There have been parts of my story that I have had the good sense to omit, but sometimes worlds collide and today I've got the bruises to prove it.

I had never been in a fight in my life, I am an easy going person. But something started to happen last week that was starting to terrify me. I had just seen my doctor about it, he assured me my blood levels were fine, but he asked me to keep an eye out for possible side effects.

Before you acknowledge one more time my excellent coping skills around AIDS, it's time you knew the truth - I have a dual diagnosis, I have another major chronic illness which I've been dealing with for twenty years, so when AIDS came around, many of my coping skills were already in place. This other illness is genetic, a sibling also has it, we are on the same medication and see the same doctor.

Sometimes I have to take this certain maintenance drug which I hate taking because it wrecks havoc on my gastrointestinal tract, causes me to sleep about four hours a night and makes me lose my appetite, and causes sexual dysfunctioning. This is made all the more terrifying because

of my fragile AIDS condition. Sometimes, it can even cause me to get highly irritable over things I'd normally laugh off.

For example, two weeks ago I noticed some typos in my work and I went OFF, I mean it's not like I've never seen them before. Other weird stuff was happening - I'd forget simple command keys on the computer, or forget what I was thinking mid-thought. Something was messing with my head and I knew it was this drug I was on for my other illness.

My friend also shares this other illness with me. While most people can't understand our friendship, it is based on our shared support around this other, non-AIDS major chronic illness. He has been like a little brother to me, a sick little brother. I feel protective of him, his grandmother calls me from the Midwest to find out how he's doing. While his volatility and self-absorption was hard to explain to others, it was even harder to explain to myself.

This medication normally wouldn't have given me this much trouble, but it was interacting with the changing chemistry in my blood from all the new AIDS drugs I started a few months ago. Anyway, my friend came over to pick up his mail, but he forgot to return the jacket he's been promising to return for months. Normally, I wouldn't

have cared at all. But when we started arguing, I did something I never do.

I refused to be intimidated by his raging side, I refused to be scared by his usual brand of screaming and yelling, and I screamed right back to him at the TOP OF MY LUNGS! He pushed me and I slammed him down and got on top of him, choking and punching him! I was horrified with myself! The neighbors across the street shouted for us to close the windows. My heart was pumping, we both stopped from sheer exhaustion, hyperventilating, as I shouted out, "It's that goddamn drug!"

Suddenly he looked at me and we both realized the truth. He came over and hug me. We both had been through many days when he was having a hell of a time with his medications and would fly off in a rage, throw stuff at me, pull a knife on me, bite me, kick my front door, slam the phone down on me, swallow a bottle of pills, or scream at me in public - stuff like that.

It takes a certain kind of person to be able to see through someone's behavior, and know that it's just their biochemistry running rampant. But in this particular case, I'm afraid I've learned one of life's basic lessons the hard way. I was clearly out of my element here - before this

'friend' came along, no one had ever raised their voice to me or been so abusive. He never reads my columns (it bringst up too many 'issues' for him) and he was never around when I became very ill a few months ago (he has 'issues' around people who are sick). For all the self-knowledge and insight I think I posses, I was pulled into this battering relationship without the inner resources to recognize it or know when to walk away.

As I attempt to achieve closure for a troubled life in these cathartic columns, it never ceases to amaze me how little I know and how much I still have to learn as I record these introspective days from the last chapter of a life well examined, and a life gladly repeated. Only next time, a few less demons and a few more angels, if you don't mind.



# Excuse Me While I Bitch and Moan

AUGUST 3, 1994

**I** actually wrote a flawless article called "Hey Mr. Molester, I Forgive You," but I'll run it another week. Instead, all this other real AIDS stuff came up for me, and since I can't tolerate my anti-depressants anymore, I'm on a bitch free-fall so just hope you're not on my shit list.

Yesterday I visited my dermatologist, which I do every six weeks, to have this KS and other AIDS stuff burnt off my face. It hurts like hell. Yesterday, I had to get up in the middle of the procedure and walk around the office just to get grounded. She blasts it off with liquid nitrogen, it welts up and blister in a few days, and two weeks later the scabs fall off. I have two weeks of okay skin, then the last two weeks they reappear.

I took a cab home because I forgot to bring my pain killers with me. When I got home I opened the *Sentinel* and was appalled to find that tired headshot of me next to my work! I through the paper up

in a fit and screamed, "Damn! When the hell are they going to stop running those hokey headshots?" I had written former news editor Kent Brandley a letter asking him to never run them again; he had originally wanted to, and I said it would be fine ONE time.

As soon as I saw that first headshot published a few months ago, I knew it was all wrong. First of all, it's ten years old! I don't look like that, I have aged, I have AIDS! I had my day in the sun and that day as long gone. I was a handsome guy, but I am the first one to say, "Yuck!" when I look in the mirror today. (well, it's not that bad) Believe me, saying good-bye to my appearance was easier that you might think.

Everytime I see that goofball headshot I feel it denigrates my work and operates like a lie - as if I'm trying to hold on to yesteryear. I'm an AIDS writer, writing about having AIDS. I have tried to get new shots of my current AIDS face but can't get a good price. I am NOT vain, I am over all that. There are no pictures of me anywhere in my house, my medicine chest is not filled with the latest wrinkle creams or KS

coversticks. I don't care that I've lost my looks, I really don't. They got me into way too much trouble to begin with.

And who the hell is this "new" *Sentinel* AIDS writer billed as "AIDS, a new direction." I'm sorry, you are the same old crap we've been hearing about for ten years. You say you're not a doctor, who the hell are you? You sound like a number crunching AIDS robot to me. What do you FEEL about what you have, what are your emotional concerns? Why don't you tell us something real? From a practical point of view, your series is nothing but crap. But keep trying

I have seen pages and pages on Nan Parks and now Miss "Hey, Faggot" Savage - I guess that means they are important and have something to say. Maybe there is a hidden message in their work that merits all the notoriety. Either all the letters I get from people who tell me how important my work as been in their life are actually written by my mother, or I'm missing something. Maybe if I started writing like an idiot, the *Bay Guardian* would do a cover story on me

before I die. I've got the headshots all ready...

Charles Caufield, I am so sorry you died by falling down a flight of stairs. But then again, you had to die of something, and lord knows it wasn't going to be from AIDS, since you cornered every cure in the book. Thanks for all your support and come back and haunt us around the old office anytime.

My "friend" Jeff wrote me a trash letter criticizing my recent death article. "Life is for the living, why don't you write an article on how wonderful life is?" he said. Where do I find these people? Are there some real thinking people out there who will pick up the ball when I die? I'm serious. You and I have worked very hard this past year with some unconventional notions on death, disease and peace of mind. I want to work with someone NOW, while I can, or else, I'm afraid, all this work will be lost. Thanks for all that "fan" mail, but I keep hoping I'll get a letter one day from someone who has something powerful to say.

I keep hoping, too, I'll get some lousy date from all these letters I get every week.

Okay, okay, I admit, I'm terrified because my ex, Bob, is coming back at the end of the summer and I want to, you know, be seeing other guys at that time so I won't feel vulnerable or tempted to hook up with him again. Or maybe it's simply time that we met! There has got to be some attractive, intelligent, HIV positive guys out there who wouldn't mind coming over once in awhile and, well, you know.



# I Won't Roll Over and Play Dead

AUGUST 10, 1994

**I** just took a pillow and beat the stuffing out of my living room chair. If you knew me well, you'd applaud. It has taken me years to learn how to express healthy anger. Unfortunately, I'm running out of living room chairs.

The pain of the newly treated KS blisters on my face, which cause me to sleep on my back with a towel over my pillows, combined with the onset of major depression was a deadly cocktail mix last night. I had just seen that "60 Minutes" segment on AIDS suicide-assistance. Because I had slept all day, I couldn't fall asleep and more than my blisters wept last night. I reached for the phone. I was about to call the AIDS/HIV Nightline (434-AIDS) but stopped myself. Knowing me, even in the depths of despair, I would have wanted to record the whole thing for a future article!

So why all the chair bashing? Because my dad called today, Wednesday, to find out how I was. It was THURSDAY when I last talked to my mom about all the AIDS pain I was in. How sick do I have to be before she checks up on me more

frequently? We go through this every time I get sick. All I'm asking for is a simple five minute phone call every other day during periods of exceptional pain and discomfort. Is that too much? So when my dad called today, all I could do was vent.

"I am SICK of this pattern," I said, "Mom always says the KS on my face is not that big of a deal because she waits until it's healed before she sees me! Who the HELL is going to take care of me? Who? WHO? It is TERRIFYING not to know. I don't see the future dying process as a time of concerned nurturing; it looks more like it's going to be a period of awkward dependence. It's a bunch of shit to think that therapy would help mom - any therapist she sees will support her and help her accept her own brand of denial and excuses without feeling guilty about it."

"All my friends have flaked out except my ex. Bob calls me from Chicago every week just to check in and say hi and always insists I read him my latest article. (I change things around if I've written something about him in questionable taste!) And what about us, dad? Before mom retired, you and I had lunch once a week, what

happened to that?" He apologized and set a lunch date for next week, and then he told me that he loves me very much.

That tells you how much we've grown through this crisis. He was never able to say those words before; our relationship as strengthened because of the work we've done around my disease. I TAUGHT myself how to vent rage and anger, the old Robert would have flipped off some bitchy comments and not spoken to anyone in the family for a month. After I finished pounding that chair, I imagined all my old dead friends giving me a standing ovation. They had too often sat in that hot seat.

It felt good to tell my dad those things, in full voice, without being interrupted. One reason I can be more real is because I recently started seeing a therapist from Operation Concern, after being on their ten-year waiting list. This added emotional support has been a tremendous gift to myself. Anyone who underestimates the heavy psychological toll of AIDS is knee-deep in denial, and destined to die in misery.

To those angels who write me supportive letters, you will never know what strength I get from you. But for you buzzards, who

tell me to stop feeling GUILTY about my active sexual past, I must say you make me feel like Tippi Hedren in *The Birds* being henpecked by all those nasty crows. Save your stamps. I never mentioned the word guilt ONCE in my work, because I never felt it. The only down-side Catholic concept I ever fell prey to is the whole idea of helping others - for that I AM guilty.

I had an old friend who never cared about what I was doing in the arts. He'd scoff at my spiritual side ("Oh, brother!" he'd say as he'd roll his eyes) yet I always took a polite interest in his cut-throat, power-hungry career. When I started writing last year, he never talked to me about my work. He'd say, "I know how much you hate getting compliments." (Oh, brother!) Instead, he'd call me every week to tell me how much he hated the *Sentinel*! He was notoriously stingy with a compliment, unless there was something in it for him. Of course, when I became very ill a few months ago, he couldn't seem to find the time to help out, even though he lives five minutes away. He certainly amended that old slogan, "If you need something done give it to a busy person... unless he has AIDS."

All those years of listening, hand-holding and ego-boosting for my self-absorbed, narcissistic "friends" as left me in the lurch. The assumption is that since I've been there so much for them, they would return the favor when my time came. Ha! What a cruel miscalculation. People are not going to change just because you're sick. If anything, you end up seeing what they're really made of - something you need to scrap off the bottom of your shoe.

Of course the only solution is for Hallmark to come up with a new line of terminally ill get well cards for dysfunctional relationships: I wish I could be there more for you but I've got to think of myself, and you're not in a position to bargain for anything, are ya, honey?" or "I'm so glad we're best friends, but you're so terminal I need to start looking for some new friends to use. Maybe it's time you started looking, too, while you still can. Love ya."

# In The Heat of The Night

AUGUST 17, 1994

**E**lliott, one of my favorite HIV positive tricks, dropped by to take me out for a drive in his new truck - as if he were a visiting nurse and I were covered with AIDS! If he came over just to play pseudo-AIDS volunteer, why was he wearing that hot new jock strap?

For a moment, he was every man I ever wanted but no one in particular. When we met a few years ago on a midsummer's night, he had the wild sex-crazed eyes of something that would bolt out of a stable during a lightning storm.

Last month I wrote about our volatile affair. I said he still wanted me to be sexually abusive towards him but that I'm not that person anymore and all I wanted to do was lay there and hold his hand. Well I'm not that same person from last month any more either. I've grown since then to realize these actions didn't represent any deep-seated bad seed in me, but were only a puckish way of granting Elliott his brand of pleasure.

Those first few sex dates were out of control in their intensity. I had twisted his arm to get his work phone number, little did I realize he liked having it twisted. This was new territory for both of us; we were doing things he was never able to do with his HIV negative husband.

If I could never be part of his life, I could still be part of his mind. I wanted to own the bitch, leash and all. I asked him if he still has that nasty picture of me I had sent him during those dangerous days. "Oh, yes," he said with a sigh, "that photo has come out of it's hiding place on many occasions." I howled demonically because I still possessed his sexual psyche even with death on the horizon. I'm a safe bet, destined to vanish, with no threat to married life as we know it. Instead of running from annihilation, we were walking towards it, lit by dusk and touched by fire.

We continue to influence each other in positive ways in areas of simple pleasures. I started smoking this week because Elliott smokes. I had never been a heavy smoker but simply enjoyed its moments of uncomplicated pleasure. Don't I deserve to have that one cigarette, once a week, after I finish my articles? If it is

something that you can still enjoy and handle, I say buy a pack today!

Elliott said, "Even after you die, I will always think of all the sex we've had." In that moment I fell in love again, not with him, but with the dance. We were caught in a tango where the music never stopped and he was already planning to objectify me from beyond the grave. "Before you die I want us to get twin tattoos that I'll spend the rest of my life trying to hide from my lover.

There could be no forever for us, no fear of commitment, it could only be short and sweet. We might get matching tattoos, I might brand him with a cigarette, but nothing more serious than that. Yes, I'm slowly dying, but it's so hot, so Garbo. It was one o'clock in the morning and Elliott wanted us to go to a sex club where met a handsome stranger from the shadows. I whispered in Elliott's ear, "Tell him to come home with us."

The amber streetlight slashed across their faces through my living room blinds. Out of the blue, the stranger said he had never been in love. I gave him that unsolicited analysis where you read their whole life in a snap just after they've shot their

wad. "Do you have any pets?" I asked. He had a cat. "Get rid of it then you'll fall in love. I got rid of my snake last month and the results have been absolutely poisonous."

The stranger left at five in the morning. I turned to Elliott and asked, "Did he kiss you on the lips?" No, it turned out, he hadn't made unsafe contact with either of us, but it felt like he had because he used that classic hot-sex technique that works every time. We never exchanging anything more than a glance.

Elliott held my hand and said, "Call me if you ever need anything. I want to be there for you in some small way." A storm flashed in his eyes. With no real history together of friendship, I didn't buy it. "Don't make false promises," I said as I squeezed his hand. I had him by the balls.

I leaned over and pulled out his belt. I wrapped it around his neck, yanked back his dark curly hair, spit in his face, and rubbed it with my hand. I felt like Samson's Delilah; I wanted to tie him up and give him a bad haircut. When he yelped like a drunken colt I had the darkest thought of my entire life. They shoot horses, don't they?

With one twist, I could have strangled him. He would have died a happy man. I didn't want to kill him, I wanted to be hanged for a crime of passion instead of sputtering to death from drool and diarrhea. I could die proud, in a final moment of sexual closure. But then I thought, "Better not, Elliott's got a truck and could help me with my grocery shopping one day."

The laws of time and space are suspended in moments of desire. Nihilistic fantasies eroticizes death and brings it into the living present. I will always be a creature of the night, even those evenings in the future where I may spend in a hospital. I will wake up some midnight and see the black sky out the window. I will smile because, in my Hickman-ported heart, I will know that hot men are still out there being consumed by passion in the heat of the night.



# It's Not The End of The World

AUGUST 24, 1994

**D**amn, I'm starting to cry hysterically into the keyboard again, I thought I had this under control. Okay, let me take a deep breath and see if I have the emotional strength to tell this week's story, it's still so raw.

Shake me, wake me up, tell me it's not true. But it is, and there's not much I can do about it except bite the bullet. Even my strong will and powerful mind could not have turned this tide. It is not my fault, it represents no weakness, I didn't do anything wrong. In fact, I did the very best job I could which is why it was caught extremely early. AIDS is not all in my head - this week it happens to be in my eye in the form of CMV retinitis, and the only way to treat it is with a daily IV bag for the rest of my life. Are you starting to get the picture?

I yelled at God this week, in a loud and disrespectful tone, "What the hell are you doing to me? Haven't I given enough of myself? Don't I get a GODDAMN minute of rest? I've been feeling and looking great these days, why now? Why

not a few more months of good times? What's the story, God, I don't get it. Why are you FUCKING with me like this?"

I laid out on my roof this afternoon, in the exact center of the city, above the incredible view swept out in front of me on this beautiful summer's day. I'm tan and healthy looking these days. As I laid out on the roof wearing my speedos, I lost it and started crying, right there under blue skies. After tomorrow, my veins will never be my own.

"No," I pleaded with myself, "don't let them take you. You said you'd never do a bag, that's when you said you'd walk away." Yeah, I might have said that then when it was more of an abstract, but now that it's just a step away, I must walk through that door, there's no turning back. It's either that or go blind.

For the rest of my life I will begin my day with the ritual of sterilizing, preparing syringes, tubing and medication, flushing and infusing toxic gancyclovir. This is how bodies start to fall apart. There will be more blood work, more monitoring, more risk of infections at the site. After I master the technique, I will be able to infuse myself everyday at home, lucky me. This is not going to be easy, I feel like I want to rip that thing off of my arm already.

Last week, when I poetically mentioned my future with a "Hickman-ported heart" I had no idea that a few days later I would actually be dealing with questions of which permanent port would best suit me. I got my CMV diagnosis five days ago, out of the blue, and treatment starts immediately. It turns out that Hickmans are older models and I will most likely opt for a port that's surgically implanted in my chest. I've got to be more careful about what I write about!

When my doctor gave me the news, I was not as devastated as many of his patients are. I knew this could be on the horizon, from my low count, and I prepared myself emotionally, which is really the only control you ever have over the disease process. A few weeks ago I met a reader who has CMV and does a bag. We visited a few times and I asked him all about his life with daily infusions. This week he has been a great resource and point of support, along with all the other wonderful people who lent me a shoulder to lean on and let me express my shocked, sad, angry, and upset sides. I even called Elliot over who was able to lend an ear. So, I guess, shoulders and ears are my new favorite body parts.

Every person who was there for my this week I met only

recently. I created this entirely new network of support people in the past three months, out of thin air, all because I started including a mailing address. This has been a gift to myself and a way of emotionally preparing myself for the tough job ahead. In fact, when the nurse came in to comfort me after the bad news, she asked if I had a partner. "No, but I have these readers who write me and..." I stopped myself because suddenly I realized the impact of the love I've been getting from you guys. It's not abstract, it's very real. Thank you for helping me get through this heartbreaking week.

I called my ex, Bob, with the news. After I explained the full picture of my new treatment procedure, I heard something from him that I've never heard in the ten years we've known each other. He wept. It was so unbearable to him that he's two thousand miles away, he so much wishes he could be here for me. That makes two of us. If ever there was a time when I needed his love and compassionate presence it's been this week. Oh, Bob, come back and hold my hand.

I knew when I took this job as an AIDS reporter, I'd have to go in the trenches, catch a few things, and write about my findings. So today's news is just

part of my job, a job that will have me writing up to the last possible moment. Yes, I'm going to take you with me, I've decided today to write up until the day I die. But don't call me an AIDS writer, I like to think of myself as more of a death and dying man. Accepting our mortality and dealing with the emotional components of sickness and death are timeless human condition issues.

No, I didn't make a deal with the devil. But I did trick AIDS and fooled death through my writing. I used its woeful tale of death as a springboard for keeping me alive forever on paper. My words will live on, in the hearts and minds of those whose lives I've touched in some small way long after my body's gone. It's better, I'm planning to be a lot more popular after I'm dead. It's the best way of avoiding criticism and, being a writer, I like the idea of having the last word.



# Is Something Missing In Your Life?

SEPTEMBER 7, 1994

**A**fter we both tested positive, Bob walked out that door and I needed to rent my spare room quick. I rented it to a young black gay kid from a small town. Since I hate loud music and TV noise, Ken would be the perfect roommate because he was totally deaf.

I thought it would be wonderful to live with a deaf man, new to the gay scene. We would talk by writing notes back and forth. AIDS education is woefully limited for the deaf community. I taught Ken about safe sex by illustration, using my nasty drawing skills. Once, he came running home all upset. He wrote that he had been in a bike wreck. I held his hand and prayed. I didn't feel the need to write down the words because a real prayer is felt in a hand held tight.

I had to kick Ken out after a few months because he was bringing home street trash he'd pick up on his tele-electronic TTY, answering ads from the back of gay rags. They didn't

have those papers back home. How did I find out Ken was bringing home hustlers? After they'd leave, I'd go straight for the trash and find the crumbled notes of their "talk" negotiating service and cost.

After Ken left I called AIDS project LA to see if there was a PWA who needed a room. My friends didn't understand why I would take in a total stranger with AIDS. I had just tested positive and Mark had a lot to teach me. I learned basic AIDS coping skills from that man. In light of no quick fix on the horizon, it would behoove some of you recently tested positive guys to form an informal mentorship with someone a few steps ahead of you in the AIDS game.

On the last day when I drove him to the hospital, I ended up in downtown LA, totally upset. I went into a dark empty bar people warned me about and followed the only other customer into the men's room. I used to process my emotional upsets by acting out sexually. I followed him to a motel in Hollywood and did him because he was a principal with a lead on a job. After we fooled around, he set me for an interview with a principal

friend of his and I ended up getting my first full time teaching job as fifth grade Catholic school teacher which I adored! God rewarded me that day for being of service to Mark and for letting that stranger be of service to me.

Ten years ago I volunteered as a drama teacher for blind and disabled kids at the California League for the Handicapped. I later taught a class of Down Syndrome teenagers; two years ago I taught junior high math at an all-black school in the Fillmore. I wasn't in it for the money, I was in it for the love.

I've done my share of volunteer work so I was shocked when Most Holy Redeemer said there would be a six month wait for a volunteer to help me out, specifically to help me with my archival paperwork. They said they have run out of volunteers! Sign up today as a volunteer somewhere, even if you have AIDS. You are desperately needed. Why not share some of your coping skills around death and dying to the forgotten elderly who would be so invigorated to talk with you about their death issues?

Oh my God, dare I tell this story that just popped into my head? I used to see this kid in a window every day until he finally buzzed me up. When I walked into his room I knew something was off. We started having sex without even looking in each other's face. When he looked up from what he was doing, I noticed he was mentally retarded! Just then his street gang brothers came home and I hid in the closet shaking like a leaf. No more mentally-challenged dudes for me!

One reason I never finished my teaching credential is because there was notorious sexual activity in the men's room of the education building that semester, courtesy of my nasty drawing skills. I never made it back to class after the breaks. One day I was in the roomier disabled stall with this hot jock and the main door opened. I peered out and it was a guy in a wheelchair heading our way! My friend bolted. As I pretended to wash my hands I looked over. He had a hot, handsome face. He spent the rest of that summer stalking me around campus in his wheelchair, hoping we'd do it one more time.

You can't help people in need because YOU are the helpless one and they lend their hand to you. You are helpless to change or fix their situation, you can only add comfort and you both stand to gain. My interaction with challenging individuals has given me strength and insight into the dynamics of being of service to others.

The shell-shocked crowd, those who have survived countless losses and given their bucket of blood, need to rest and be blessed. The world needs any one willing to lend a hand and receive back unconditional love from that patient, student, or person of need whom you've given a real part of yourself. Once you participate in the volunteer bloodstream, you become the new blood and the experience invigorates your life forever.



ROBERT De ANDREIS

# Like A Bridge Over Troubled Waters

SEPTEMBER 14, 1994

**E**lliot and I did something in bed last night we've never done before; we cried. As he held his beautiful body next to mine and kissed my neck, I wondered how many more nights we had left together and cried silently as he held me tight.

I tried to conceal my upset but he felt me tremble as my warm tears trickled down his chest. As he tried to comfort me, I whispered, "I'm slowly dying, Elliot. I can't stand it anymore!" Don't believe me for a minute when I say how prepared I am to go. I have moments of absolute terror and

sadness over death that will never leave until the day I die. I looked into his watery eyes and told him life was slipping through my fingers so fast and I was falling for him all over again.

Earlier that day, my doctor refer to my new CMV diagnosis as something one gets in the later stages of the disease. Later stages?! I threw back his bluntness with some assessments of my own, "If this is the last year I have, then why would I spend a dozen of those precious days with my eyes annoyingly photographed and dilated for six hours, hauling myself over here just to be part of your study, with no direct benefit to me at all?"

Quality of life issues are important to me now. I try to protect myself from plummeting into emotional despair by anticipating some of those needs. I met Elliot a couple of years ago when I was still AIDS-free and he always reminds me of that carefree time that went by so quickly. I thought he could be some sort of an emotional safety net for me. I didn't care that he had a lover because I wanted just a small part of him, mostly his hand to hold.

We never discussed any emotional elements to our affair for the first two years, it was slow going with mostly heavy role playing and intense drunken disclosure. I was

doing that asymptomatic scramble to find a love interest before I got sick. Although Elliot was woefully unavailable, I couldn't stop thinking about him and his likable persona.

On the surface, it seemed like I was sabotaging myself by focusing on this unavailable man with time a wasting. But my persistence paid off. At just the right time, within these past few months, the stilted growth gave way to a vital bloom of care and support. It may be a late bloom, lasting the shortest of moments, but the intensity and beauty is just as sweet.

I never found that last minute lover I wanted to help me thought my disease. Instead, I found a man who created a space with me where it's okay for us to cry in each other's arms over this illness. "Oh, Elliot, I can't bear the thought that these monthly visits may be our last. The next time I see you I'm going to have that port implanted in my chest. I can't bare to think that I'll one day lose my looks. Everything is going. I'm not ready to be one of those sick guys sitting on a couch looking like hell, waiting to die, no, NO!" I burst into tears, not knowing how close to the surface my fears were. He, too, cried on my shoulder.

The first night I had the temporary IV line put into my arm, he came over to give me

support but his own emotions overcame him and he wept at my feet in a total fit of compassion and empathy. I had never seen this side of him or seen anyone cry in front of me over my disease. I was startled by the intensity and stunned by his vulnerability.

He started to apologize, saying he had intended to be there for me, but I said, "No, your feelings are just as important here." He talked about his helpless pain over my latest slip of health. We could no longer be in denial with my new shackle featured so prominently. All I could do was run my fingers through his hair as he was beginning his grief process, mourning for me, for all that will never be. He'll have no place to go on those full moon nights when I'd leave the door unlocked for him. I wonder, who will hold his hand when I die?

We ended up having a passionate evening and the tubing and taped catheter on my arm all but disappeared in the folds of sheets and skin. It was so wonderful that he came over that night; it broke the spell of my ominous diagnosis and treatment. The best cure for falling off the horse is to get right back on, and he is one trick pony I'm eager to ride.

I no longer see the time we spend together as stolen moments. It as grown into something real and comforting in its simplicity. Maybe we

didn't get to be lovers in this lifetime or even spend a whole night falling asleep in each other's arms. Maybe he always leaves me to go back home until the day I'll leave him forever. But he came around just in time to hold my hand and hug me at this critical junction.

I was reluctant to pull a new lover into my life after I tested positive, despite the unbearable need for comfort, so seeking a lovable man who was unavailable for the whole nine yards was the next best thing. I wagered a bet with time and won. I tenaciously held his interest through sexual intrigue, praying it would all pay off someday. What I didn't count on was love.

It was bittersweet news last night when he finally told me he loved me, now that I've got half a t-cell left. He never had to tell me, I felt it from the start, but it did ease my mind. In moments of pain and sorrow, special people appear out of the blue to guide you through turbulence like a bridge over troubled waters.



# Rebel Without A Clue

SEPTEMBER 18, 1994

**M**y ex, Bob, still comforts me long distance with the words, "Be brave, little soldier." Bravery is too often underrated and minimized but in every moment of AIDS reality, bravery play out silently by all the players, not just the AIDS rebel.

From the nurse who must pause at the door and take a deep breath before she opens the door to tell you bad news, to the guy who takes his first AIDS test, alone and in secret, to my friend Dexter's risky business this week, AIDS as created an army of secret soldiers bravely marching forward while scared shitless inside.

In one big brave move my mother offered to drive me to Marin to see my ailing longtime friend, Dex. Since his ex-lover caregiver, Barry, and his doctor forbid him from getting behind the wheel of his beloved

Porsche after crashing a tail light recently, I thought I'd never see him again.

It all started two months ago. I knew Dex was sick, but not that sick. When he called me to say he had a birthday party the week before and didn't invite me because Barry can't stand me and didn't want me in his house, I was furious. In the twenty years I've known Barry, we haven't spent more than five minutes together, there were no words or fight, he simply hates me.

It upset me so much that I didn't get to see all my old friends for this last living party for Dex because of some stupid hatred on Barry's part. Chuck had driven all the way up from L.A. and was told not to call me. The whole thing was so sick I hung up on Dex and wrote him a wicked note asking him not to call me again. Then I added to my total regret, thinking Barry wouldn't invite me to it anyway "Tell Barry not to bother inviting me to your skimpy memorial service, you're been nothing but trouble since the day I met you." As I slipped it in the mailbox I had a sinking feeling that maybe my note was too harsh.

The phone rang. It was Chuck telling me what bad shape Dexter is in. "He's in a wheelchair, Robert, if you want to see him you better make it soon." I had to call Barry and ask him to intercept the letter

before Dexter ever receives it. Barry called me a sick fuck and slammed the phone down.

A few days later Dex called to chat and forgot all about our little fit. Then I remembered, Dex has dementia. The day of our lunch, my folks drove me all the way over there only to be greeted by a note on the door. Dex wanted to meet us at a nearby restaurant.

There was no sign of Dex and I thought that Barry was pulling something. My mom turned around and dropped her folk. There was Dexter, thin as a ghost, standing confused in the doorway, holding a barf bag, looking very brave. We both started CMV IV therapy the same week. Instead of retinitis, he has CMV in his liver, so systemic damage had extensively weakened his body. But the IV drug was working, he was a bit more spunkier and said he drove himself to the restaurant!

Apparently he and Barry had a huge fight that morning about driving and Dex took his own keys and split. As his friend, my job is to honor his perception of himself. I told him I thought it was great that he's independent again. "Well then," he said, "let me drive you back to the city and we'll hang out together." My folks shot me nervous glances. I had to honor my friend and agreed to the ride. Once he got behind the wheel, he was fine despite the tremors. He had logged in

over a million miles a truck driver and knew the road like the back of his shaking hand. "You're driving very well, Dex." His face lit up.

His doctor refused to surgically implant a long-term port for him, claiming it would be too risky because he was going to die soon. It was heavy news and he lapsed in and out of accepting it. When I said that I had never had to use a barf bag before, he snapped, "Are you saying I'm further along than you?"

"No Dex, that's not for me to say." He's was running parallel tracks of preparing for death and future activities, telling me he wanted to sew his own AIDS quilt panel, then he said, "Let's go swimming!" And what, hold our IV taped arms out of the water like synchronized swimmers? I agreed and support everything he said, even if I found it outlandish. Yes, it was brave of my to get in that car but a part of me knew to absolutely trust what was really going on. Namely, I was supporting my friend in his last rebellious act, he had been such a rebel all his life.

He needed to get away from Barry for just a few hours. Even though Barry hates me I did nothing but support their relationship and reinforced Barry's concern because he really is doing a great job with Dex. It's just that Dex needed to flex some

independence and needed me to help him feel like a bad boy one last time. He had always been an upstart with an explosive temper. It was great to see some of that finally subdued by illness. What was even greater was to see how much of it was still there.

His mid-sentence memory was shot. I had to help him finish his half-baked ideas all day. He was always asking me to tell him what he just said. As he got ready to leave at the end of our adventure, he said for the first time, "I don't care if Barry hates you, you're still my best friend and I love you." I pulled back and looked into his fierce blue eyes. He could see mine where watering. He looked at me quizzically, "What did I just say?"





# Besides That Mrs. Kennedy, How Was Dallas?

SEPTEMBER 20, 1994

**This has been the worst week of my life and I still can't get the blood off my pillbox hat. If you see a laptop computer covered with HIV, sweat and diarrhea crashing through the window of Kaiser's AIDS wards, watch out, my doctor's next.**

Yes, this is the week I fell off the HIV cliff with my first AIDS hospital stay. But don't send me any flowers. Since I have had all my white blood cells destroyed courtesy of my new CMV medication and a deadly new blood infection, cut flowers, fresh fruit and top-notch medical care are not allowed in my room, where I'll be for another week or two. Yes, this is the bitter, sickbed character assignation article where I finally trash my doctor, if only I could remember his name.

I take full responsibility for my share in what became of our partnership. Like a fool, I thought it was so important to have a charming gay doctor with a nice personality. But these days, I wished I had selected some homophobic asshole instead who had the

balls to treat this with some degree of cutting edge aggression.

I don't care how awful this sounds, but sometimes gay people who climb the upper echelons in the professional worlds are more concerned with assimilation than rocking the boat. It's all of us screaming upstarts with nothing to lose who end up speaking the loudest. This is what I told him to his face. I say speak up or shut up.

"Don't get my wrong, I am not blaming my plummeting health on your personality, I just feel you are not at the helm. It is not only my job to read every goddamn HIV newsletter and article about AIDS, I want to trust your medical judgment. You have been a very pleasant, charming man but that's not good enough anymore."

I reminded him of when we started out partnership two years ago when I was asymptomatic with a high t-cell count. We discussed antivirals briefly. I was reluctant about taking them, but certainly not militant about it. Although, like many of us, I got swept up into the anti-antiretroviral issues voiced upon us by our

non-medical peers. "Maybe all it might have taken was three extra sentences from you to convince me to start them, but all I got was an "oh well" attitude and your friendly smile. What's up, doc?"

I've gone through the most frustrating and physical discomfort I've ever experienced in my life this week. Nobody told me that this electronic infuser IV pole has a battery back pack up and could be unplugged. When I had a diarrhea attack in the middle of the night, and the tube attached to my tender, surgically implanted chest port yanked as it became tangled with the crashing phone cord, I thought I had to wheel the pole across the room but the cord wasn't long enough and I ended up loosing it in a swampy mess of tears and despair.

Or maybe the worst moment was when I tried all day, amidst fevers and frustrations, to get this goddamn borrowed laptop computer to work, after loosing several versions of this story already. I called the Sentinel and broke down saying there wouldn't be any article, my first skipped week,

but a reader called and talked me into it, instead of supporting my decision to take a break. Selfish bitch. I realized no pain medication had been ordered as I woke up in the middle of the night and was given only Tylenol after my surgery. Or those night staff nurses who'd leave the light on or the door open after waking me up from my restless sleep to take blood. Or maybe it was those two injections into my thighs, or the time I yelped when my new port had to be reassessed with a needle through tender tissue. Maybe it was in the middle of the night when I shivered with night sweats and they couldn't get the cold air conditioner to stop blowing in my face; a nurse held my legs as I stood on a chair, IV in tow, and taped a pillow case over the vent using my extra sore pectoral muscle. Or maybe when it was when my doctor gave me a few months to live...

The nursing staff as been incredible. If you ever want to know the truth about a treatment, diagnosis or doctor, ask a nurse. They know the score without all that attitude because they don't think they're

gods, although I tend to think they just might be.

In the middle of the night I was awoken by a gentle touch but there was no one else in the room. I know this sounds eerie, but I looked up and could see the absence of a person sitting there calmly looking at me. It was no one I knew. The I realized that many people have died of AIDS in this very room, several recently according to my nurse. I later discussed this with a wise friend who sensed it might have been one of my deceased readers, offering a hand to carry me over to a place I may have helped him into. You guys!



ROBERT De ANDREIS

# Winged Victory

SEPTEMBER 28, 1994

**When I die I want my soul to inhabit that statue in the Louve, atop the grand staircase, the one without identity, face or arms; only massive wings, flying in stone for eternity.**

I thought about this as I laid in the hospital during those past ten days as a mental exercise of flight. After I die I want to tour the great Museums of the world, fly into the highest cathedrals, and inhabit scenes from my favorite paintings, but I think I'll skip the Jackson Pollacks!

Let me find my last companion, a sultry Botticelli youth from the Renaissance with clear eyes and a lively spirit, without all that attitude. We'll rock the gondola laughing as we pass the murky waters of Canaletto's St. Mark's Square and duck as we throw bee-laden flowers at Caravaggios' two-bit Venetian whores. Ah, to be playful again in the company of old familiar souls. I need to gather up my eternal collect of lifelong companions from other ages to help me say good-bye all over again.

I had a mystical experience at the onset of AIDS ten years

ago amidst rumors of a new gay cancer as I studied at the School of American Ballet. I closed my eyes and felt my dancer's body move off the bed and could see it gently rise above the vanishing lights of Manhattan. I spiraled through time and landed in the presence of God, beaming immaculate light and astounding vibrations. We greeted each other with big smiles and cocktail kisses even though we were both wearing the same dress! He showed me scenes from my former lives where my strong-will had fought its battles throughout the ages.

In one scene I was locked in a tower, kept alive during the plague, only because I could amuse the queen with my pen. I hope that queen wasn't you, girl, because I'll rip your eyes out for keeping me shackled up like that, you bitch. But I died an old man with a wicked laugh echoing throughout the land, eternally amused by my own trashy writing.

God said he wouldn't give me anything I couldn't handle, provided I could handle hell. He said I could think of him like a mistress on dark and stormy nights. I rolled my

eyes and said, "God, leave the poetry to me."

There is nothing enlightening about AIDS, it certainly didn't create all my attitude. I talked to my sister and tried to pawn off my strong persona on my disease because I'm dying soon and finally able to speak my peace. "Nothing doing," she said, "you've been outspoken since the fifth grade!" AIDS changes everything about you except who you are.

It is not a gift either. There is nothing wrong with you because you can't find one in it. You are not alone. You are not going to become enlightened over night just because you had unsafe sex, it takes a little more work than that dearie. AIDS will only help or hinder a journey you started a long time ago. But there will always guides along the way to hold your hand, laugh with you and vanish at the exact moment you think you can't go on without them, only to show you that you can. Screw all that praising God stuff, it bores him to no end. Instead curse and scream at him during your lowest point. That way he sends you the most beautiful angels in the world to play with.

The last night of my hospital stay, a volunteer in his twenties walked into my room and startled me because he looked fresh from a painting I had just been thinking about. I could see that he was bright and kind as he told me he had been a Peace Corps and Shanti volunteer. Because he didn't know anything about me or my writing, I felt I could trust him with objectivity with my private pains. We talked for an hour, mostly because he was full of fascinating stories from his travels and was a pleasure to be with.

This random hospital visit led to a subsequent interview and he agreed to start a trial period as my new Shanti volunteer! I had always been the helper and it will be a challenge for me to receive help although it's so much easier when they're pretty to look at. I can finally breathe a sigh of relief. By chance, we ran into him at the Folsom Street fair; he had seen me just days before in the hospital, wearing a backless gown most girls wouldn't be caught dead in.

Practice visualizing images with your mind's eye, then when you cry out in delirium or collapse in grief and you

will be carried away for the thrill of the flight and the passion of victory. You may even conjure up some real hands on help. All the people who need to help you will appear in stillness, like frightened animals, hoping you'll trust the innocence of their offer. Take that help with pride. Never forget where you came from, because you're going back there sooner than you think.

Although these columns are never written in advance, with nothing on reserve, I was going strong on reserve yesterday. I felt victorious after I got out of the hospital and went to the street fair because I still can, working that sleazy, full blown AIDS look with my tanned, needle-marked showgirl legs. I stuffed my nasty white shorts and wore my open leather jacket exposing my newly accessed chest port, fingering my roller clamp and tubing like a string of pearls. And, believe me honey, I didn't have to worry about anyone wearing my same dress this time!

ROBERT De ANDREIS

# Unsafe Mistress of The Dark

OCTOBER 5, 1994

**I'm feeling the dark side pull me in like a tongue sucking spit out of the mouth of a stranger. Somewhere between safe and unsafe is the risky realm of passion. Let's shed some light on this shadow world with a clinical examination of desire.**

Allow me to take a break from personal disclosure, I'm feeling too vulnerable to share anymore elements from my private life. Instead, let's open up an objective dialogue on the rationale of sexual behaviorism and it's impact on the decision making process by first examining the various subjects in question.

First, there are HIV positive men on drugs who take unsafe risks with a partner under the excuse of intoxication. Or guys with internalized homophobia who hate the community that infected them and feel justified to pass on their virus. There are men who refuse to get tested because they fear being positive, yet carry on as if they were negative; guys who know they're positive but don't tell

their new boyfriends until emotional attachments have formed, positive men who go to sex clubs and take risks because they incorrectly assume that every one there must be positive too - all questionable behavior.

Anatomically speaking, there are guys out there who know you are tempted to take greater risks with them in the heat of the moment if they have a huge dick. There are guys out there with huge dicks who can't quite stuff it all in your mouth and your jagged tooth scratches the skin just enough to draw blood. There are guys out there with big dicks who know you'll let them fuck you even if there is no condom nearby. I've never read about this in safe sex campaign literature.

There are guys out there who don't pull out after they say they will, shoot their load in your mouth after saying they won't and kiss you in a moment of passion despite the canker sores in their mouth. There are guys who pick up guys even though they have a cold, guys who use make-up to disguise suspicious marks and guys who only have sex in

dark places so you won't notice their active sores. There's a technical term for guys like these. They're called assholes.

Research indicates that all that soft-sell safe sex campaign geared towards the younger market hasn't been completely effective, through no fault of any organization. Blame instead that faulty, male wiring that short circuits the reasoning functions during moments of intense sexual arousal when blood drains the forebrain and engorges swollen erectile tissue. Allow me to suggest some alternative modes of safer sexual behavior.

After I tested positive I promised myself I'd never fuck some guy again despite my overwhelming passion for that activity. I could never get used to rubbers and was concerned about breakage so I simply refused to engage anymore. In fact, I don't have one single condom in the house that was big enough, quite frankly, because the biggest sexual organ is the brain and the only time I want a plastic bag over my head is when I'm ready for my final exit!

There's alot you can do besides having tired unsafe

sex. Elliot wanted to see me last night but I feared his visits to me in the hospital may have broken the spell of our affair. After we both got loaded, we admitted how terrified we were about having sex now that I have a chest port, even though the beauty is that when it's "unplugged" or de-accessed there is nothing visible but a slight bump under the skin. But what happened last night surpassed all others.

I'm usually in control but last night he slapped me right back! Nobody deserves to be hit, but I do need to be put in my place once in awhile. I felt that primal violence of male energy; we fought, wrestled, and hurt each like never before, in new and exciting nasty ways! He kept biting me until I clawed him with a vengeance. I've always wanted to send him home with cat scratches on his back, at four in the morning, with his lover waiting for him with a rolling pin, "You've been out with that..that ROBERT again, weren't you?" WACK!

We both don't understand what comes over us, but whatever happened last night eclipsed any thoughts of death,

it was so exhilarating and cut right through the usual noise in my head. It kept bringing me into the present moment. In fact, when he grabbed the belt I was beating him with and smacked me with it for the first time, I felt so ALIVE. It startled me, no one ever hit me before. That aggressive male sexual energy took over as I pounded his chest, screaming, "You fucking bitch, you gave me AIDS," said with a smirk because it was a ridiculous lie.

Clinically speaking, I worked out much of my rage over AIDS, and even my intense feelings of closeness towards him, in this unusual way because passion defies logic. As a writer, I'm proud that I didn't have to resort to my usual personal disclosing to make a point and I'm also proud to say that our whole evening last night had been entirely safe, except, of course, the part where I fucked him!



ROBERT De ANDREIS

# Indecent Exposure

OCTOBER 12, 1994

**This Sunday I'm going to give a talk on my work. I think readings are dull and never do the original justice so I will talk on the subject of private disclosure in a public forum, read small excerpts and be very nervous about this rare public appearance.**

I put my poor friend, Biron, through the wringer. Before my blood transfusion I was exhausted, he couldn't have caught me in a worse mood. For weeks he has been suggesting I start to promote myself as a writer - nobody's going to do it for me and the rejection letters from publishers keep piling up.

He said I've been snubbed by the AIDS community, "There are over 220 AIDS organizations in town and not one of them as send you as much as a postcard. No one from the AIDS community as said two words to you. No one as asked you to speak, guest facilitate or sit on a board..." Sit on a board? Sounds uncomfortable, doesn't it?

Nothing as happened with my writing in terms of publication. I can only do so much. It's been frustrating trying to manage even the simple things like answering reader's mail, in addition to combating this disease. It's hard to pull a last-minute career together when you've got about five minutes left to live.

I'm running out of breath. It can't do both and getting my rest takes priority. Biron called to get me thinking about a reading and I snapped his head off, "You don't seem to get it! I'm exhausted, I can't be running around trying to promote myself, I've got infusing on my mind." CLICK! Ten minutes later he called back and got me a date at A Different Light Bookstore.

One reason I want to do this talk is because I want people to see that I'm not all decrepid and vegetative just because I have full blown AIDS. Sometimes I feel that readers think I've nearly all but rotted away and that all that's left it just some old knarled hand, still clutching a pen with an IV it any vein that's left, like

Thing in the "Addams Family" but with a lot more snapping.

This process of personal disclosure certainly didn't start off that way. While it's all true, I don't tell everything. What happened today in the infusion center was so personal the only person I could tell is, well, YOU! I told the nurse, Iris, I needed to talk to her privately. I was there to have my last practice session on learning to stick that needle in my chest port. I told her Elliot came over again last night, she's been reading all about it. It's one think to have sex with a T-shirt on and pretend it isn't there, but last night he touched the metal port under my lump and felt the scar and, yes, put his mouth on it and totally kissed it like it was some kind of wild third nipple. I was stunned by the gesture but sometimes I think he does these things just so I'll write about it.

I asked Iris if that was a medical no-no because of the skin pierced with the needles. She assured me it was no more riskier than other parts of the skin because the needle site had healed for twelve hours. She said no one had been

honest enough to ask her that. When we began to go through the steps of the sterilization process for accessing the port, she said "Wait, wait, first we'll need the lipstick removal."

I get my material from life and don't change much. I also recall the nastiest parts of my life just for fun. Apart from any enjoyment you get from my work, I'm having a hoot. I have taken great pleasure in writing all year. But that's not entirely true, is it? There were some hard stories to tell, too, but we got through them and your cards and letters always made my day - which will definitely be another topic of the talk.

My parents are going to this talk but I told my mom, "I'm not going to change a word just because you're sitting out there. You might feel uncomfortable but I won't." Nothing doing. We got into a great talk about unsafe sex, poor national dissemination of AIDS information in the media, I told her I stopped screwing instead of slipping on a condom, I mentioned Elliot came over and we we're able to be with each other without the tubing

exposed. We talk about real things.

Before her early retirement last year, she was the gay-sensitive counselor and family life teacher at a top academic public high school. She taught AIDS and safe sex to teens, with speakers from CUAV giving talks about being gay. Last spring, she directed a project to display a section of the AIDS quilt in the theatre with a scroll to sign. I read something she had inscribed on the scroll and lost it. It said, "A promise to remember..." and she listed all the names of the friends I've lost. She remembers their names, too.

This disease as brought up so many varied emotions for all of us. I'll be talking about the process of translating those intensely personal feelings for public consumption. It has been an honor to add to the collective body of work by AIDS writers. And if I had to open up my own Pandora's box in public and watch my snakes slither out, the price was worth paying. Besides, it wouldn't be the first time a snake has slithered out of my box in public.

# Good Help is Hard to Find

OCTOBER 15, 1994

**I** hear it all the time: "I'm dying of AIDS and my lover is getting short with me." That's because you've turned him into your shopper, cook, domestic, nurse, counselor, and all-around slave to your disease. You selfish, AIDS-ridden bitch!

It's a classic mistake and it happens all the time. An incorrect assumption is made that the HIV negative lover will one day in the future have to juggle your whole life together while you just kick back and croak. Don't you dare think of doing that to your sweet lover who has his own grief issues to nurse.

While you are relatively asymptomatic it is your moral obligation to sit down with your partner and map out some caregiving strategy. Don't think for a minute that everything will just fall into place when the time comes. It will all fall on your lover's shoulders and he will eventually feel like a trapped rat and harbor the darkest thoughts of his life: he will hope for the day that you die

so his whole nightmare will finally end.

I usually don't write about things I don't have hands on experience with, but I have seen and heard too much of this tragedy to remain silent any longer. If you want your lover to be there for you emotionally, hold your hand and comfort you in a way only he can do, let him do just that - and only that, leave the grunge work to someone else.

As I approach a new stage of my illness, I am grudgingly assembling what I like to call my "Death Squad" - those neutral people with whom you have little personal history with, who have come into your life for the sole purpose of helping out. Don't turn your parents, friends, beloved neighbors or roommates into your personal AIDS slave either, there are people out there who you've never met, who would LOVE to come over and scrub your toilet.

Don't assume the people who are emotionally closest to you are going to have the strength to help you in a practical support way. Sometimes, their own issues of anticipating your lose are too

great and they end up acting out their emotions in passive aggressive ways - they may show up late, miss a scheduled visit, pick up the wrong thing at the store, not be there for you as the friend they've always been. Forgive them, for christakes, they are not flaking out on you, they're mourning your future passing.

I have a personal repulsion against asking for help and it will be my ultimate downfall. My parents raised us to be independent and that's not always a good thing especially in times of illness. There's an old story in my family about my grandmother who was dying of stomach cancer and living alone. We found her collapsed on the kitchen floor because she was too weak to walk and crawled on her hands and knees across her apartment. If that ever happened to me I'm sure I would have had my Dust Buster in tow to do some vacuuming along the way.

It's a totally rude disservice to everyone in your life to not participate in the assemblage of your Death Squad. Let paid professionals or volunteers to the work they love doing.

Some volunteer adjacencies have six month waiting list. Sign up now before you actually may need them. You must get your head out of the sand and make some practical plans. Today.

Sometimes the overworked lover throws himself into all this caregiving drama as whirlwind deflection from his real emotional pains. Instead of having frank discussions with you about death and dying issues, he becomes totally distracted with the mundane. Why is everybody so afraid to talk to their sick and dying partner about what is really going on? It's no big secret and talking about it as a wonderfully soothing effect that gets more comforting the more you gently discuss it.

When people tell me how independent they are, I laugh in their face. Nobody is independent, especially someone with AIDS. You could populate a small town with all the people you are dependent on in some way - from your doctors and nurses, to your emotional support people, to the mailman, grocery store clerk, host from your favorite talk show,

singers of your favorite songs, any human being who helps you get through your day. Independent? Independent my ass.

Volunteers hear it all the time. They walk into a caregiving partner/ AIDS patient situation and the volunteer ends up providing emotional support to the lover - because there's nothing else to do, all the towels are folded, the diner's prepared, the garbage as been emptied and the diapers have been changed. Let the volunteer do some of that and go in there and stroke your lover's hair or hold his hand. That's your real job. Have you fully worked out your death and dying issues way before things got this bad or are you running around exhausted because it's away of avoiding your ailing lover? You wouldn't be doing that now, would you?



ROBERT De ANDREIS

# Bite The Hand That Slaps You

OCTOBER 19, 1994

**I** am terminally jinxed by the photo gods. Someone at the Sentinel must have rummaged through my trash, found a reject, then printed it in a most ghastly way, airbrushing away the last of my charms. It was just the icing on a rat-infested cake for me this week.

In all fairness, it was the photographer, Biron, who screwed me over. We had agreed on three shots that I liked but he took a fourth one I always hated into the office, a bait and switch. I was appalled! But something much worse happened with us this week. Last month we did a shoot and did all kinds of different looks, including the perfunctory semi-nude, yet tasteful shot. I got caught up in the moment and he assured over and over again they would never be seen by anyone.

The clincher came when he made that lovely poster for my reading. He said when I picked them up at the copy place there would be a surprise. He had made a poster, with my name and reading date, from that highly personal picture! I was mortified by the total

lack of taste and breach of trust. THEN he called to say he had made a few more AND they were "accidentally" distributed to some AIDS organizations! I was LIVID beyond belief! How DARE anyone exploit someone dying of AIDS! He just laughed it off without so much of an apology. And I thought we were friends...

For the last three weeks, my ex, Bob, has been in town visiting me. Ha! For months and months it's been one big protracted fence-sitting tease after another: I'm coming out to help you. I can't decide. My bags are packed. I don't know what to do. I'll be there soon. My lover and I are starting to get along. I never want to spend another winter in Chicago. I'll take care of you ...and on and on. Excuse me while I lay here and die, you just give a ring when you decide.

His final solution was to visit me for three weeks after I got out of the hospital; let's make that three weeks with his family and three days with me. Those three days together were just enough to remind me what I don't have - the companionship that would make AIDS hell a bit more bearable.

The saddest moment was when he got up from the couch in the middle of the night and snuck into my bed and put his big, burly arms around my skinny body and held me tight for exactly two minutes. Why? Because he was having a bad dream about AIDS. A flood of emotions engulfed me: God, how I missed being held in bed; how wonderful it would be to be comforted like this and how terribly alone I am during these last days of my life. He went back into the living room and I cried myself to sleep.

So many heartbreaks this week. To top it off he invited his parents to this reading last week. Along with my parents, brother and sister, therapist, Shanti volunteer, and other people from my personal life - not to mention all you fabulous people who did go. This is written before the talk so I can't tell you if I even showed up for it!

My sister, Yvette, told me to throw out all my notes I had prepared and get in touch with my feeling at the moment and be myself. Maybe that's why I spent the whole day in bed crying yesterday with the phone unplugged. I didn't want to see Bob and his parents after all his jerking around, with his best intentions, of course. I didn't want to see Biron after his cheap stunt. I freaked out and asked Yvette to call them, and my mother, and ask them not to show up! I have AIDS; I am in a fragile state. My explicit writing leaves me way too vulnerable. I haven't a clue anymore as to why I'm writing all this personal crap. This whole talk was starting to seem like some sort of twisted living wake that I wanted to ditch.

Last night I called my parents and sobbed on the phone, "I don't want to do that stupid talk, I'm too upset about everything." There is a huge split between what readers are getting from my work and my real, skimpy life. Some weeks it takes me an hour to write these little monsters, other weeks it takes me ten hours for my best pieces which amounts to \$3.50 an hour! What a great supplement for my SSI \$650 monthly income! No, I'm not doing it for the money.

Don't think for one second that I am better off than you just because I write this column. I'm dirt poor, can barely

pay my bills and struggle every month to live like so many of us. I hate to cook which is why I'm down to 130 pounds, on a six foot frame. I open the freezer every night for dinner. I come home to an empty house. I have to arrange days in advance to have someone drive me to a store. I take the bus to the doctor's. I come home to an empty house after a four hour blood transfusion and treat myself to a cheese sandwich. I have no more old friends or companions; they've all died, moved away, had babies or run from my illness. No one opens the door for me if it rings while I'm infusing and my dead friends don't answer the phone when I still absent-mindedly dial their old numbers.

I have a volunteer who helps me two hours a week. My folk are a phone call away - but sometimes I need more than a phone call. I've met five new friends from the reader's mail but, boy, the people I had to meet before I met them! No one is holding my hand or tucking me in at night or letting me cry on their shoulder, unless, of course, it's arranged in advance. I am a prisoner in my apartment on this steep hill in the center of town. I've asked for very little as a columnist, but today I am asking. Thanks for all your kind letters but... do you have an hour sometime to help this dying writer, take me out to lunch, run an errand for me? Those are the hardest words I've ever written.



ROBERT De ANDREIS

# The Boy Who Couldn't Say No

OCTOBER 26, 1994

**L**ast Sunday, before I gave that fun talk, I had an astounding revelation and learned a big lesson that's eluded me for years. Sometimes it's the thing right in front of your face that is the hardest to see, especially when you're married to him.

I was such a mess Sunday that my therapist from Operation Concern had to make a house call. The last two sessions I had with him I invited my ex, Bob, to join us. There were so many heavy feelings going on around his visit and indecisiveness over moving back to take care of me that I felt we could both stand to benefit. After the first visit Bob was delighted by the forum and said, "Why the hell didn't we ever go to counseling before?" I choked up. It was the only thing that could have ever saved our mess of a marriage.

As we sat on the steps of my apartment, under brilliant sunlight, my therapist finally put the pieces together for me. It never ceases to amaze me how much more I have to learn. "Bob's a very bright man," he said. Those words jumped out at me because I had always suspected it. "But his mind has been atrophied by a of heavy infestation of classic codependency and chronic people-pleasing, to the point of fatigue, syndrome."

I'm leery of trendy psycho-pop jargon but I trust my therapist's instincts. Suddenly everything made perfect sense. Big sturdy, burly, hot 'n hunky Bob has NEVER said no to anyone during the ten years I've known him! He always wants to swoop down and save the day but he forgets his own cape. He tries to help everyone but is totally paralyzed about meeting his own basic needs. He used to call himself Fireman Bob because he was always putting out everyone else's fires while pissing on himself.

When I advanced in my illness, he promised to come help even though he lives in Chicago. Last week I was so bewildered that he decided not to stay and help me, and that he spent the bulk of his three weeks with his family, whom he also can't say no to. How selfish! How absurd it was for me to even think it was okay for him to leave his home, career, dogs and lover to become a total caregiver to his moodswinging mess of an ex. What a selfish bitch I was! If I had been more aware of it at the time I could have said, "Thanks, honey, but don't be ridiculous! I have my family and friends here; I love all your support, but don't hop on a plane and give up your life for me." But there I was last week, pouting and sniffing about Bob abandoning me and letting me down!

He called Monday to find out if we were still speaking, after my sister asked him not to come to my talk because of the emotional stress. He didn't know if he'd get kisses or a CLICK! I opened my heart and shared my new insights with him. I could hear a light go off in his head. Months ago I wrote a bitchy article about him called "I Married the Missing Link," and now I understand why. During our years together, we BOTH married the missing link - to falsely strengthen the weakest link within each other. His codependency allowed me to stay in my sex and drug addictions because he could never set boundaries with me. Because I always played *psychodrama process queen* with him, analyzing him twenty-four hours a day, he never felt the need to get real help - although I probably needed it most of all. Is this learned? Recently his mother went to a Co-da meeting, she was the only child of deaf parents and could never say no to them either. The mystery's solved: Bob's a big "Co"! We were both so excited, I

wanted to go out and buy us a pair of matching divorce rings!

On his last day in town he saw my therapist and had a great private session, his first ever. I threw a going away party for him, just the two of us, and bought him Melody Beattie's *Codependent No More*. We talked all night about the past ten years and laughed, recalling tales that made his disorder so obvious. It always dumbfounded me that this man, who knows me better than anyone, has never gotten a t-cell count, yet I've plastered my latest lab slips all over town. Why his complete denial in light of my obnoxious total acceptance? Then I got it - he is petrified of being in a position of not being able to help anyone anymore. Moreover, he'd have to ask for help from others, something he's never done. My God! Maybe now this man who I love so much will finally begin taking care of himself and stop playing Superman to weaklings.

His long trip had finally ended. There I was, the person in his life with the greatest caregiving needs, telling him not to help me anymore and feeling joyous about it, even though I am working through my own issues of asking for help. It was another twisted AIDS moment. The airport shuttled tooted. I wished him all the best and renewed happiness with his current lover. We hugged good-bye so tight he nearly pushed my chest port through my heart, where he will always hold a special place.

The "Co" thinks he's helping every one but ends up helping no one, including himself. With an inability to set limits, he overextends himself and can't deliver his endless promises to the world. It's immoral to take help from a "Co", no matter how sick you are, because it's exploiting someone's dysfunction. An enormous weight has been lifted off my skinny shoulders. Besides, he's not the only hot man in town who can hold my hand. There were plenty of takers at that talk I gave! Would that handsome guy with those beautiful eyes who said he was a teacher please contact me. You CAN teach an old dog new tricks!



# TO BE HUMAN IS DIVINE

NOVEMBER 2, 1994

**H**eaven and earth are so glad you were born. It just wouldn't be the same without you. You have been an integral part in the shaping of the world. But get ready to say good bye, we'll never forget you, because Heaven waits in the wings.

Saying good bye to the world is the hardest thing about having AIDS. It's not because we leave this glorious planet, it's because we don't know what's behind the golden door. Unfortunately, Heaven concepts can be so...Disney. Quite frankly, the idea of spending eternity with some people I never liked to begin with terrifies me.

Death turns us from human to divine in a flash. All the cruel things that go on with the body in life are vindicated in one glorious snap. The sick and dying can experience both heaven and earth if they do their homework. Awareness of this dual vision is incredibly empowering. There is a phenomena we talk about in

death circles: dying people receiving acute mental clarity during the end stages but only if they have worked through their denial issues all along. An apt reward, wouldn't you say? You don't have to be currently dying to tap into this. You can receive this awareness by working it out around someone else's death too, like mine! I have sought clarity all my twisted life and finally have a shot at it because I accept I'm going to die soon. Heaven or not, here I come...

Oh, Robert, PLEASE! Put down that HARP! Get down to earth! Are you bullshitting your readers again? Why don't you write about what is REALLY going on today? It's too easy to write those abstract stories about heaven and earth, GET REAL! Tell them what you found this morning sitting on your kitchen table that absolutely repulsed you!

For the first time in my life, I was so tired after dinner I had no energy to clear the table of a terrible meal I tried to cook. I was exhausted from infusing and running errands

and went to bed hungry. I popped two sedatives, instead of my AIDS pills, because I'd wake up in the middle of the night sleepless on an empty stomach or sick on AIDS pills taken on an empty stomach. Give me a break, I'm still learning how to be a sick person. In the morning the underdone baked potato and dried out chicken carcass, left over leftovers, was covered with ants!

Did I appear to ask the readership directly for help two weeks ago? I'm sorry, I do get carried away sometimes! I was really trying to illustrate a point on the realities of day to day AIDS life, although those lunch dates from cute guys still stands! (no blondes, please!) The truth is, I will only go through normal volunteer channels, like everyone else. Stalkers stay home! I would never take help from a well-meaning reader where no boundaries, training, or support structure exists; it would be inappropriate. But to those who did offer, thanks - but why not help the several volunteer agency in town? You are needed!

I reader said that he felt I was a "pathetic crybaby"

using my column for my own good. I said, "Of course I am! Who's good am I supposed to use it for - yours?" I write about my real life, giving a panoramic view of life with AIDS. Sure, there are tears and pathos, it would be odd if there weren't, along with emotions from A to Z. AIDS is filled with heartache and humanity, humor and the hum-drum. I hear tales of unspeakable sadness much worse than my "coming home to an empty house" story, like I'm some kind of AIDS latchkey kid. Besides, I failed to mention, I LIKE living alone.

I've been selling myself short by not writing about what I REALLY go through day to day. Maybe I should be more explicit. I've been writing these weekly columns for a year and a half now and when I first started I DIDN'T HAVE AIDS! This disease has engulfed me too. All along you think you're going to handle it better than the last person, but it creeps up on you and wears you down. Much of it is simple UNAVOIDABLE. That has been my most comforting thought lately. Mistakes happen, a meal missed, a visit canceled, just like in real life because this IS real life; it doesn't get more real than this. But things go wrong in life;

it's never going to be all perfect with a regiment team of obedient caregivers circling the clock while you're circling the drain.

Last night's botched meal happened because my folks took me to lunch and I was too tired after to go grocery shopping, thinking I was stocked up, but I wasn't. I was so tired yesterday after infusing because I had a flu shot on Saturday and broke out in a fever from it yesterday. I was barely able to drag myself to the *Sentinel* to get two months worth of back pay, but the checks weren't cut yet, which left me without grocery money. I was never this kind of adult as a well person. I was always right on top everything, independent and self sufficient. But I am NOT a well person anymore. I am a sick person. And no one teaches you how to be a sick person. Except me, right?

There is nothing brave about my story, it's all standard AIDS fare. Your time will come too, angel, ready or not, and when it does, I would be honored if something earthy I wrote gave you a taste of heaven because to be fully human - heart and soul - makes you absolutely divine. Just make sure you give me a big hug when you get to heaven.



# HONEYMOON PAIN KILLERS

NOVEMBER 9, 1994

**I** rocking back and forth, sitting on a red inflatable donut. Even though I just took a hot bath, some strong pain killers and Xylocaine, a topical anesthetic, I can still feel every searing anal pain that's lasted way too long.

I go for weeks without a bout of diarrhea, then it resurfaces without warning. So today, when my Shanti volunteer called, like he always does right before he comes over, to see if there's anything he could bring me, I said, "Yes, a pack of cigarettes and some, soothing non-scented, aloe-based baby whipes." A new AIDS nurse friend of mind recommended them after I explained my condition and knew exactly what might help. Those guys know all the tricks of the trade.

After years of AIDS diarrhea, your raw anus can bleed and scream out every time you use it - and with diarrhea, that's lot of screams. A quick fix is to draw a hot tub, like I did at three in the morning last night after I woke leaking in a bed of bodily fluids. Even though this caused abject pain I still had to change my sheets in the middle of the night. I'm stocked on liquid stain remover under the sink. When I have to change my sheets in the middle of the night, I do it as a ritual that gives me a feeling of control over what just happened. I give the stains a good soak, toss them in the hamper and forget about it - then I don't have to find it on the floor next morning.

I couldn't get to sleep and slid on my wet bathroom floor stumbling from the pain pills. I noticed I hadn't pulled the drain on the tub and reached down, slipped into the tub, and blacked out for a moment with my head immersed in that murky water. Later, I squirmed with anal migraines but these were the worst ever. I crawled over and spilled out my box of over-the counter supplies - everything but Xylocaine. I found a protective adults undergarment from last year, my last Stock up now before you think need then, because, believe me honey, you will.

ROBERT De ANDREIS

During a light leakage week, I'll wear a shield, an absorbent padding which sticks between me and my Calvins. They also act as an extra layer of cushion for raw days and are great for unexpected surprises. It also gives me peace of mine at night so I can fall back to sleep. In the heat of my pain, I decided to get Xylocaine myself at the 24 hour Walgreen on Castro down the street at three in the morning. I bundled up, called a cab and waited by the door rocking in a fetal position. But the cab never came and I woke up the next morning - crawling with ants!

By seven, I was paralyzed with pain when I heard my front door open. I forgot my mom said she'd be dropping off some laundry! The timing was flawless. I screamed from my bedroom, "Mom, don't go, I need you..." I couldn't even finish and broke down completely. She came into my room and cradled my skinny body, chest port and all, as I sobbed like a baby in her arms. But even moms can't stop the pain.

She bought me Xylocaine but it barely worked. Later my sister brought over the red inflatable donut she used during her pregnancy. As soon as Kaiser opened I called an advice nurse who said my doctor was on vacation. It's too bad because last time we had a frank talk on his attitude towards pain management. He was totally pro pain control and would have had those pills off to me in an hour. Instead, it took me ten hours from my first call to take my first pill!

By late afternoon, I finally saw a doctor who used a painful anoscope to diagnose it as a fistula - a tubal restriction that may result from an abscess or inflammatory processes. It could do nothing more than heal on it's own, or surgery may be required. He said I was doing everything right with hot baths. "NO," I said, "I took six Codeine's and two valiums today and that's NOT enough." He balked until I DEMANDED stronger medication - and got it!

Later, the lab called. My white blood cell counts, which guard against infections, were dangerously low and I'd have to have another blood transfusion tomorrow. I mentioned to my infusion center nurse, Iris, I was having trouble urinating. She said it could be a side effect from the new pain medication or complications from the

fistula. They wheeled me immediately to the emergency room, fully awake! I watched then shove a tubing through the slit of my dick, past my prostrate, and into my bladder! I asked them if my new bag comes with gloves and a matching pill box hat!

Iris noticed the pink color on my port was an early sign of a possible infection, usually cleared up by antibiotics. But Pat, my doctor's nurse wanted to check me into the hospital! "No way!" I said, "We've already cut off the DHBG which is destroying my bone marrow. We increased the Nupergon injections ten fold for my WBCs, which is all they could do in the hospital for me before anyway, and I'm already on a low-dose of a systemic antibiotic for this staph infection. And besides, the only thing that is helping this anal fistula heal is my continued hot baths at home. There is not one single bathtub on that entire Kaiser AIDS floor! In fact, my last room didn't even have a shower stall."

Later, the lab called to say I'd have to come in for a blood transfusion tomorrow and had to take a cab right back for matching blood work. The next day, I used that four hour transfusion time wisely. I asked the Kaiser in-home care director to come down and do an intake interview with me, to possibly set up additional practical support. Later, at home, another doctor called to say she called in an order for prescription strength suppositories which I could pick up. When I took a cab back they said the order wasn't brought down in time and I'd have to wait until tomorrow.

I still don't know the status of last weeks critical blood cultures because they got "misrouted." I don't even know if I have an abscess that needs to be surgically drained. That tubing will be removed from my dick in a few days, even if I have to yank it out myself. After that painful wracking catheter procedure, I was off that table in ten minutes with my parents, holding me up at both sides, dodging that Geary Boulevard traffic, to go back to the infusion center because today's new blood work had also been "misrouted" The ER staff said to keep my catheter sterile, I should use an alcohol wipe at the end of the voiding tube. But Iris said, "No way!" and insisted on showing me the all-out, heavy-duty disinfectant benzodine technique to be apply where the rubber tubing meets the slit of the dick. She offered to gladly demonstrate but first had to change into something more comfortable.

# My Only Regret

NOVEMBER 16, 1994

**A**s I near the last stretch of my tired life, I think about one thing I wish I had done. It might sound absurd or even self-deprecating to admit this so late in my life. But to this day, my only regret is that I didn't do porno.

I don't pretend to represent some wide spectrum of typical condo fags spread across the country. I speak from my unconventional life and I admit, it has been a disturbing one. Something unconventional caught my eye in last week's Other Section of the Sentinel. It was that photo and story of Scott O'Hara, one time porn star, champion of public sex, now writer for "Steam" magazine and HIV person, with "HIV +" tattooed on his arm. Something about his story struck me.

Maybe it was the part about him "having the biggest prick in town" that made me think we might be kindred spirits of sorts. Oh what a trap that club can be. I thought somewhere our stories might connect; I might even be given some insight as to why I used mine the way I did - mostly as a weapon against myself - boing! Yet, somehow, it seems, he

never had that same kind of trouble with his.

I left a message at the studio where his photos are showing, never expecting to hear from him, but he called this morning - and was so well spoken! We talked awhile about various sexual projects we've both had, he even knew my work. Actually, "Steam" had approached me last year about writing for them but I didn't have a clue as to what I was doing with my work and rudely snubbed the invite, typical me. Anyhow, we both agreed how hot it would be to do AIDS porno. Doesn't that sound WILD?

While asking him his various attitudes on sexual issues, I was careful not to sound like I was interviewing him, because I wasn't. I regarded this opportunity as a way to gain insight into someone who may have gone through similar experiences: like possible sexual addiction, self-exploitation and all the ruthless objectification by others, not to mention thwarted intimacy issues. But, from what I can tell thus far, his party line is free and clear of all the typical traps I fell into, kindred apparatus or not. Yet, I'm still looking for clues into my own difficult past, even at this late date, so I can be cremated in peace.

Most guys have fantasies about having huge dicks, but let me tell you, it fed my sex addiction like a dragon

and burned away any boyfriend material in sight, except addicted sex pigs who would do anything for dick. And they did. If you knew how many guys I've had, you would have trouble logically comprehending it, and it was definitely more hell than heaven. I look back at all that playtime as a painful irritant in my soul that never quite healed. But it did make me a mean string of pearls.

I wished I had accepted those offers to do porno when I could have; then there would be some accountability for all those years when my family and friends weren't sure what I was doing with my time and why I was such a, well, loser. How did I survive emotionally? Basically, I shut down, numbed myself and didn't feel much for all my years as a bitchy boy toy. I laugh when readers make fun of all my stylized histrionics. I was never ABLE to feel anything real before I started seriously processing my AIDS stuff. These days, I am so proud when I do get angry or upset, let alone write about it, because it represents a big emotional breakthrough for me.

I am reflecting on my self-exploitative behavior, not because it gave me this disease, but because it robbed a part of my spirit - the part that longs now for that last touch of intimacy, taken for granted then and now so icy rare. Maybe having a few thousand blow jobs over twenty years tends to distort one's sense of intimacy. But in the end, where are my old regulars now? Where are those guys last year who'd come knocking at 10 am on a Sunday morning, swearing they weren't tweaked, until they'd pulled out their own raw, greasy dicks?

It was certainly easy for them to come by then. Where are they today, now that I need a little help? Dead, I hope.

Sadly, Elliot remains the last of a long line of intimate regulars I collected over the years. It's sad because, although he occasionally tells me he's in love with me - usually after his second bottle of wine, what he really means is that he's in love with my dick. I was in such physical and emotional pain three weeks ago and decided to risk his possible cold shoulder by calling him at work, my only way of reaching him ("This is not a good time, I'll call you tonight" and he never does). I waited FIVE days for him to visit me in my urgent state. He always promised to cook me a nice meal sometime but when he found out that my big, beautiful Italian dick was temporarily strapped down to a catheter bag, he came over and made dinner alright. But what exactly was that, Elliot, Alpo or Skippy?

I made a date to meet Scott O'Hara next week, and I'm sure I'll tell you all about it. Or maybe I won't. It's sort of an off-the-record personal thing. In all my years of being out, I was never known for my intelligence. This is not just another endless indulgent exercise in narcissist deathbed disclosure. It's a warning. The longer you hang on to that empty world, the more likely you'll come up empty handed when you need a hand to hold. I wish I had been kinder to myself and treated my body with more respect. Maybe being a loner, by design or default, has given me a life incomprehensible to some; but the vista, paid for in pain, has somehow brought me closer to God.

# Death-Defying Tricks

NOVEMBER 23, 1994

**I** hate deathbed denial boobs who tell you on the day you die: "You don't know you're going to die. Why, I could get hit by a bus tomorrow." Yeah? Well I think anyone who says that **SHOULD** get hit by a bus. Then they can talk from experience.

I met Scott O'Hara at the Flore last week. While he was so proud of his "HIV+" tattoo, the minute I referred to myself as dying he balked. Did I say something bad? I love to bug people with that - then I can tell in an instant what level of denial they're in, usually knee deep. Scott said, "I consider myself to be living with AIDS not dying from it." Now, there's an novel thought.

When do I get to say I'm officially dying? When my ashes are scattered over Buena Vista Park? Scott said something very keen about death, "Part of the life process itself involves death and therefor it's not AIDS that kills you, it's life itself." It brought a tear to my eye - the left one, where the CMV is, the one I'm going to have surgery on next

month because its starting to lose it's vis...vis...I CAN'T SAY IT YET! I too, have my own denial issues. The difference may be my eagerness to get out of that state, no matter what my body is going through. Yet Scott wouldn't admit that he was involved in any part of a dying process. But I have to respect where he's at with it now. You can have a terminal disease, and announce it to the world, but just don't say the "D" word.

Later this old friend, Ric, called when he recognized his story in my article last week about showing up tweaked and all that. We ended up talking about the emotional parallels of our lives. I've liked him so much and it pained me to see him stuck in a world I left gracefully, but I was so glad to hear that he is finally going through a healing process to sort it all out. He, too, is learning how to be still with himself which is the only way you can learn to feel again.

But he has this absurd notion about me. Just because I explore my death issues, he thinks I'm huddled up in my apartment with the shades drawn down, like Norma Desmond, dwelling on it for

days. Actually, I hardly think about it anymore because I've done that acceptance work a long time ago. My life has never been richer, more alive, since this process. Ric knew a few pieces were missing from last week's story - like my passion for decadence. Also, nobody left me - I left them, I walked away from that empty world. This is the most beautiful apartment I've ever had, with is idyllic location and sweeping views. I am proud to say this is the first place that didn't become some heavy traffic, trick stop. Leaving that world and learning how to live a more peaceful life were things that came out of accepting my disease and preparing for it gracefully. "I'm learning how to live again," were the beautiful words Scott said about his reasons for moving from his gay porn fast lane life to a Wisconsin farm, milking cows.

It's okay if you never process your death stuff. It's also okay to live under the freeway in a cardboard box. Preparing for death means, "I want a happy death." It means when I am rounding my final stages, in a hospital bed that someone else is probably

dying in right now, I want to be surrounded by happy, smiling faces amidst the sound of nervous chatter and laughter, with excitement in the air - anticipating a very special moment. That's only going to happen if, as part of my acceptance process, I involve everyone surrounding me as well. Like it or not, your dying days are your final teaching assignment and legacy. Make it a paradigm of honor. If you die well, you leave behind an incredible gift to your loved ones - the hope that one day they, too, could learn to die a happy death.

A later-stage professional caregiver friend of mine asked, "What do you want to wear?" He said it's a questions his dying clients never expect to hear. He asks them what they want to be dressed in after they die as a final act of dignity. Usually you die in some yucky old thing. Sometimes the body is washed, preferable in some special, scared way, if these wishes were made. Then you should be dressed; you will be seen by the ambulance attended and the staff at the mortuary or cremation facility. You don't want those guys to see you in some ratty old bathrobe, do you?

My friend says some men go out in everything from business suits to leather. Touchingly, one man's wish was to be covered with

exquisite petals. I'd prefer poison oak - to keep those body snatchers away from me. I personally want to go out in full Scarlett O'Hara drag, before the war of course, with a ten foot hoop shirt. That way, they won't be able to get me in that bag and at least I'll have a fighting chance to run away. Run, run, down Market Street! Those hoops and bonnet take a gust. I'm gone with the wind, floating above the city screaming, "I didn't just die of AIDS, I lived with it!"

Don't die a bitter old fart, still holding grudges, and "fighting" this disease to the bitter end. I stopped fighting long ago. It's going to do it's thing whether I fight or not. Sure, I do what I can with my treatments, but one day I, too, will be another person who died of AIDS. So get used to it! my death work along time ago. Yeah, things continually come up that freak me out, (LIKE THIS EYE THING!) But in general, I graciously accept my changing self. What's my choice? In the meantime, I will continue to feel the most alive I've ever felt in my entire life. So there.

ROBERT De ANDREIS

# THE TWILIGHT ZONE

NOVEMBER 30, 1994

**L**ast week in the *Sentinel's* Other Side, art critic Stephanie VonBuchau said that art happens during a crisis such as AIDS, when conventional healing fail. Then she mentioned my work in the same breath as an AIDS composer for the San Francisco Symphony and the AIDS quilt herself!

I screamed! That was the FIRST professional acknowledgment of my work in the gay press by anyone. Thanks, guys. Although I've written over seventy columns, and the response from individual readers has been mind boggling, the AIDS press continues to snub me and I'm not sure why. I'm not a professional writer, just a person with AIDS trying to tell my story. Doesn't that count?

I enjoy writing every week but on a bad day, like today, I wonder if it's serving me anymore. I have gone through life threatening bouts and FORCED myself to make my deadline. If you were sitting in my living room last month you might have been disturbed by the sight. My parents

came by to take me in for anal surgery, but because I was in such pain, I was running late. Then the *Sentinel* called and wanted my story. My parents were telling me to forget it this week because we were so late and I was in such a state, but there I was at my computer, unable to sit down, crawling on my hands and knees, popping those Percets, printing out a final copy. Why am I doing this anymore?

Last month in the hospital, my brother lent me his laptop but I couldn't get it to work and broke down several times admit painful medical conditions until I was finally able to crank out a story. Is this healthy behavior? Yes! When my doctor told me that I could have easily been dead by now, I knew the one thing that keeps me going is this weekly deadline. Although I won't win the war, personal goals and reasons for living have helped me win the battles.

When I started, I naively thought I would meet a few good people, maybe a few hot guys, and receive some professional acknowledgment. Was that too much to ask for? But the only thing that is different since I started is I now have a box of fan letters sitting in my living room - and that's the extent of it. I thought my work was cutting edge, not cutting envelopes. I am hardly the toast of any AIDS circles, maybe my brand of honesty is too disturbing, so what am I supposed to do? Lie, just to get acceptance?

That reading and talk that I gave, where people said they had never seen anything like

it in term intensity and attendance, neutered me zilch. I went home that night, all charged up, thinking I was on to something, stunned by the reception, yet nothing came of it - no contacts professional or personal, no invites to speak again, nothing, nothing, nothing. In a week it was like it never happened. The fact that I may be dead next year as given no one a sense of urgency to utilize my living self. I figure media prospects are waiting until I LOOK like I have AIDS, frail and emaciated, to interview me - which is the time I WON'T be interested in appearing in public. I'm the only one who feels any sense of urgency around here. If you wait any longer, all you're going to end up with is a microphone strapped to my urn.

Although I have met some people from the letters, the process has been undaunting. Generally, a reader may invite me out to lunch in a letter but not give me the slightest clue about who he is. What kind of an invite is that, short of rude? If we meet, I feel extremely awkward realizing that under normal circumstance, I would never disclose any of the personal information in my columns to them; it's very creepy. I have always been a private person but laid it all out there in the hopes that lives may be saved and death may be appreciated. But all this eerie disclosure as made me more of a recluse than ever and twisted my sense of personal privacy.

I used to HATE it when my infusion center nurse would tease

me about something I wrote. I'd go in every week and pray she hadn't read it, but sure enough, out would come some wicked comment to tease or embarrass me. Under normal circumstances I would never have talked to her about things from the deep recesses of my soul or the tawdry parts of my past. It never stops me from telling my story, but it totally works my nerves.

When my two volunteers come over, I wonder what they think about what I wrote that week - especially if it was personal. I explained to them that I never would share such information with them, and I want them to leave all that at the front door when they come to help. Upon his second visit, one wanted to bring his lover over to meet me. No, that's a professional boundary not to be crossed. I have AIDS, I'm not a novelty item to be passed around for show and tell.

I decided to call a reader today. First, he made fun of me and my requests for help from the readers I requested and later retracted. I told him some scary things happened which made me retract. For as street smart as I am, I am trusting of people to a fault. After insulting me, he felt free to discuss my intimate psychological issues as if he was my therapist. He was glad Bob and I are working through our co-dependency issues, he disagreed that I was exploited as a teenager, he was shocked that I let a stranger in my home one night as part of a phone sex stunt. Here was a total stranger talking to me

about my most intimate matters. This was clearly one step beyond.

It has been hell juggling this fledgling writing career and struggling with full-blown AIDS. Despite requests in this column for help to preserve my work, no help arrived, despite all those "Robert, we love you" letters. My younger brother, David, stepped up to the plate and took over my attempts to self-publish, after a flood of rejections from publishers, and sheer exhaustion on my part. We worked very hard and I am proud to say we finally finished a smart, self published piece of my first 56 articles. It's flawless and spiral bound and so you can rip out the most offensive articles if you want to give it as a gift! We consigned it into A Different Light Bookstore and I am proud of Dave for all his help.

He ended up learning a lot about my private adult life. It's been the same for my parents. It's not a matter of shame, it's a question of privacy and appropriate boundaries. I would never have told my mother that I was a heavy-duty whore but now she knows because of my work. But it's none of her business. The psychological toll of this work has been intense. I shudder to think of all the peripheral people in my life who have read this steamy journal. I was taking some clothes down to wash in the building and ran into my apartment manager who made some wisecrack about something I wrote. I held up my bundle and said, "If you don't mind, let's just stick to this dirty laundry."

ROBERT De ANDREIS

# Needles in My Eyeball

DECEMBER 7, 1994

**M**y friend Dexter called me from his deathbed just to tell me what an awful article I wrote last week. I don't need that shit.

But my real needs remain out of reach. I don't want to be on Oprah, I just want to hold some sultry man once before I die. I'm sick of dick, I just want to be kissed again. I'd be in heaven but maybe that's what I have to wait for. Let's face it, the hottest men are dead, but so what? It gives me something to look forwards to. After I die, and assume my new role as mistress of the after life, I'll go after your hot dead lover, so lonely while he waits for you, amidst all those fluffy, feather clouds. Of course, we'll never tell.

On Monday I forced myself to call Elliot because I needed him for a change. He thought I was mad at him for the cruel cracks I made about him serving me dog food a few weeks ago when my dick was out of commission. Some people just can't take a joke,

but he should know I can't pass up a tacky line. He naively took it to heart and believed he really was that mean to me; sometime she's got the IQ of warm sperm. If I told him the truth, that I was having disturbing medical worries, he never would have called back. So I used my nasty phone voice to lure him in. "Hey, little boy, do you want to get into some trouble?" I know where his buttons are and I can trigger him into a sex trance all day at his busy desk job. Like clockwork, he called me back and we set a date for Friday.

All week I spiffed up, like a mangy peacock with about one bent feather left - putting on weight, practicing with my hair products, and subtly clipping to enhance the illusion. I needed a diversion from my dismal illness this week. I needed the support of a "significant almost but not quite". Elliot regards me as little more than a dildo, hidden in a shoe box - despite my muffled cries for help, shoved under his bed so he can grab it during all that hot vanilla sex he has with his devoted husband. Of all the potential suitors I casually discarded, I am stuck with Elliot, Ashley to my Scarlett, who's just as remote and won't give an inch - which is just about the size of it. Over the years, our affair started to feel like a houseplant that I would water, nurture, and even write love letters to. But it wouldn't

grow, thrive or even die - because it turned out to be made of plastic.

I focused on Elliot yesterday during my eye treatment - looking forward to Friday as I braced myself in the doctor's chair, in that dim office, waiting for my very first eye injection. After a series of drops, and having a black rubberball strapped around for pressure, my expert doctor came in, he's done thousands of these injections, lowered back the seat and hooked a device to keep my eye from blinking. He told me to look up at the clouds on the ceiling and not move - does shaking out of my wits count? All I kept thinking about was Elliot, kissing the back of his neck and running my fingers through this dark curly hair. Maybe that's why it didn't hurt a bit. It hurt more that morning when the lab drew blood, and even more when I got my monthly injection of testosterone in my rump, for appetite and energy.

I went on Friday, ahead of schedule, hoping it might give me an edge on our date. But in the middle of the night, I woke up with such a painful shot-induced charlie horse, I hobbled around my apartment the rest of the weekend. The things I do for dysfunctional love.

I foolishly wanted more unavailable support from him for the surgery in two days where they are implanting an

experimental pellet of gancyclovir in my eyeball with a series of needles, scalpels and dissolvable stitches - all clean I hope. And, yes, I have to be awake for the whole procedure. I'm just not supposed to twitch or cough. The doctor's lobby has a Christmas tree done up in glass eyes - oh, that medical humor. Was it too much to think Elliot might be there for me in some remote way? At the last minute, he canceled our date last night! I guess his lover wanted him to stay home and watch "Unsolved Mysteries." If he really had a cold why didn't he tell me hours before so I could have made other plans? Luckily my Shanti volunteer was already here when he stood me up. As much as I told myself I was going to be gentle with Elliot tonight, and not smack him around at his usual insistence, something came over me when my volunteer called to see if there was something he should bring over. I got a sudden flash of nastiness! "Yes! Go to Walgreens and get some duct tape, I'll explain later." My volunteer is so supportive. After Elliot canceled, we walked to the corner store and bought some beautiful flowers, pretending they were from Elliot. I laughed, "It's a first, he's never given me flowers before; STDs, no. STDs, yes."

By contrast, my Shanti companion has a rare innocence. I can safely discuss

my sexual issues with him because I know it won't trigger him. He made a great meal, and stayed later than usual, we hung out and smoked a few cigarettes. Despite his mid-twenties trendy appearance, he is refreshingly asexual, at least with humans - possibly with angels. He's one of those HIV negative souls, who volunteers all over and is very involved with STOP AIDS, that exclusive good boys club. But I'd never dream of being inappropriate with him, despite his wholesome appeal. It's more of a fraternal thing, and I respect and value his work too much. But mostly because he's told me he'd only suck a cock with five condoms on it! Oh, the things they teach you at STOP AIDS. After he left, I decided to take a cab to Blow Buddies but fell asleep in my feathery bed dreaming about all the best cock suckers who are dead. Oh, how I can't wait to get to heaven. But Elliot missed out big time. I was going to tie him down, duct tape his mouth shut so he couldn't respond, wear my nasty new black leather gloves, and tell him what a shit he's been any how much I still love him. Then I'd slap him a few times and kick him out - without having sex all.

ROBERT De ANDREIS

# A Twinkle in My Glass Eye

DECEMBER 14, 1994

**A**n attractive reader came by yesterday before my eye surgery to hang out with me. But I was in a highly anxious state about today's operation to temporarily arrest the CMV in my eye so my bowels terrorized me and ruined my date after weeks of stability.

I had to run into every restaurant bathroom we could find, which amounts to two in the Castro. I ended up squatting unladylike in the freezing cold near those palm trees on Market Street. A STOP AIDS recruiter ran past me with disgust. He certainly didn't talk to me about his clipboard issues. So what if I looked homeless, can't I stop AIDS too? Or maybe I didn't fit that "STOP AIDS" profile for their "hot volunteers". Any AIDS newsletter that advertises the attractiveness of its volunteers as a selling point is just more self-exploitation to heal from. When are we going to start fully embracing our

ugly members? After I'm dead, I hope.

After diner, this reader walked me to my door. He's a sincere type who somehow managed to get past my diseased piranha moat and electric fence, inaccessible ball of confusion that I am. I can't tell if he's a column chaser or not. He did, after all, have lunch with Nan Parks last week. When he tried to kiss me goodnight I jerked away, not wanting to give him full blown AIDS. Alas, he was a blonde - frosted at that. Was I really that bad in a previous life?

I came home to take a hot bath, twice a day for my slow-healing fistula, and had a major intestinal attack, it was major pre-eye surgery jitters. Shit! I jumped out of the tub and ran to the toilet but slipped and completely lost it all over the bathroom floor - hair products, my cordless (don't answer that phone!), EVERYTHING! But being the AIDS trooper that I am, I got down on my hands and knees and scrubbed that floor Crawford-clean in five minutes flat. My folks came by to get me at seven the next morning in the shivering cold. After being admitted, a nurse told me to take everything off, including my shorts. I explained that I had intestinal problems all night and was wearing a protective undergarment and would feel comfortable if I could leave it

on. She wasn't about to say no, she'd have to clean it up.

The hospital was chilly, it's a way of keeping bacteria down, so I was freezing in my skimpy gown and form fitting adult diaper. There is a way to tape them tight so they almost have this hot Calvin basket look - but it takes practice. In the empty surgery waiting room, a nurse asked me to sign papers. I noticed her wedding ring. Why wasn't I still married? Why wasn't someone squeezing my hand in this icy room telling me everything was going to be OK? Because there are no depths to the cruelties of fate.

They rolled me into the high tech operating room, inserted a wrist IV and brought me to a "twilight sleep" - I could see the huge bright lights above me and hear muffled doctor's voices but I really didn't give a shit about anything at that point, despite hearing things like, "Could you grab that leach on the floor so we can get some of this eye gunk out?"

I recovered quickly by noon because this surgery was not the highlight of the day. I tried not to think that this newly inserted pellet of gancyclovir will only last six months before it's replaced - or not needed again, if you know what I mean. But today I was most concerned about going somewhere I had been looking

forward to for months. It was the start up of Paradigm, a non profit support program to those with life-threatening illnesses. Like it or not, it's about time we got some support in this town for all our real, heavy duty dying issues. I do what I can for things I believe in, like Kairos House and their help for caregivers. In fact, if you ask for their winter newsletter you will find an amusing article I wrote for them on how PWAs sometimes turn their lovers into maids, nurses, cooks, counselors and all around AIDS slaves - then wonder why their lover gets snippy with them.

eyeball or not, I will be doing an interview with a gay reporter from the San Francisco Chronicle on Sunday, January 15, 1:30 PM at MCC as a benefit for Paradigm. She enjoys my work and uses it as instructional material for a writing class she teaches. But what could it be, Deathbed Disclosure 101? I value being thought of as a writer once in awhile, and not just this big whacked-out AIDS mess. Even if I have an unexpected medical setback in January, I'll still have my bad eye in a glass jar on the podium, rolling upwards, no doubt. Dr. Richard Wagner, PhD., from Paradigm is also more interested in my death and dying writing than my sleazy skills, although he did ask me if something I wrote

was really true. "Oh, please," I said, "you can't believe everything you read in the *Sentinel*!" It's getting harder to wink these days with a glass eye. This afternoon was the first session of Paradigm's pilot program, men and women, from cancer, HIV to just being a plain old self-identified "not a well woman." Despite my post-surgery queasiness I called Richard and decided to join as planned, an hour after being discharged, and was glad I did. I figured so what if I looked like hell, everyone else there will be on their last legs anyway. I wish I wasn't dying, but I am goddamn it, so I might as well learn what I can to make the best of it.

Before I left the hospital, the nurse said I will have to wear an eye patch at night for several weeks and not sleep on my left side. But I already can't sleep on my right side because of a treated KS lesion that's blistering my shoulder, and sleeping on my stomach with my implanted metal port sticking out of my bony chest doesn't leave much room for comfort. So I'm learning to sleep sitting on the toilet. It sure beats all those late night runs.



# Holiday on Ice

DECEMBER 21, 1994

**A** few weeks ago I went to the beginning of Paradigm, an eight week support group for people with life threatening illnesses. I sat next to a seventy year old woman with lung cancer named Rita who was quite articulate and funny, but she never should have called me at home.

If my phone ever rings around here it's usually a wrong number. It rang the other night and it was Rita. Damn, I thought, I was just coming out of surgery - did I put my phone number on some list out of duress? I hate it when people call me at home from groups but I was still icy polite and moved by her woes and tale of loneliness. But I'm all tapped out, I can't give my support to anyone else right now. This is a time for me to receive.

At the meeting, I sat next to Rita on the couch and exchanged humorous asides with her all afternoon. The facilitator, Dr. Richard Wagner, Ph.D., showed Rita my

compilation of articles but I always cringe when people read my stuff around me. She had that funny, Jewish way that brought back all those memories of my former lover, Bob, and his Jewish family. She reminded me of all the women I met at Bob's sister's wedding, where I got to mysteriously sit at the head table with the family as Bob's "friend."

He called this week from Chicago and insisted, as per usual, that I read him my latest article over the phone. It was that Elliot slam dunk piece. He was supportive and encouraged me to not see Elliot again, saying it's not healthy for me right now to be with people who don't have concerns for my emotional needs. He reminded me that I have been working hard all year to get rid of all the dead wood in my life - which is the only way to make room for healthy, new growth. The truth is, if I was still fit, this fling would have gone on endlessly. But my needs have changed, my body has changed, I can't waste time anymore on dead end situations. Bob and I joked about Rita in our best New York Jewish accents, although he does it a lot better than I. I'm so glad we did all that work recently on fully letting go of each other so we can finally be close again.

I met this attractive reader again, yes, the blondish guy from last week. Suddenly I am

starting to feel nervous about getting to know him. He's been following my work for awhile so I imagine he knows a lot more about me than I know about him. There is something about his energy that is very open and - *gulp* - almost angelic. At least that's what a friend of mine said who met him. But, wings or not, no fool dumps their baggage down the first few times you meet them.

I told this guy that death and dying comes with the package and it's not business as usual as far as getting to know someone new. I am just so guarded of anyone who wants to get to know me on some personal level. I can tell already he's starting to feel some emotional connection with me. Uh-oh! The thought of someone getting close to me terrifies me these days, despite being rather lonely. Why? Because I'm a big, whacked-out AIDS mess, remember? I'm great with the written word and other worldly charms, but fall flat on my ass when it comes to all that "getting to know you" crap, and my worst, frosty ice bitch side comes out. Don't look so surprised! Maybe that's why I keep scaring them off. Is it possible for someone to really see beyond my illness? But the bloom is off this rose, honey, and you'll get nothing but thorns. I've asked him not to read the *Sentinel* for the duration of this minor, possible subplot, so I can

properly dish it and keep you posted as things develop.

At the next meeting of this support group, I sat next to Rita who said that test revealed the day before that her lung cancer had now spread to her brain. She talked about self-delivery and other ramblings. She said she felt like she had landed in exactly in the right place for this moment in her life and thanked Richard for his new Paradigm support program. In just this one week's time, the sharpness of her mind had rapidly deteriorated. Richard said she shouldn't think about self-delivery until next week because we were having a guest speaker from the Hemlock Society to talk to us about it. He told her if she was serious, to wait and find out some more specific things about it so she won't botch things up and possibly find herself in a much worse situation.

After the meeting, in the pouring rain, Richard and I drove Rita to her doctor's to pick up some more morphine. We waited outside in the car for an hour. The icy windows fogged up and Richard made professional advances towards me. I trashed Joseph "I hate boundaries" Krammer from Body Electric for crudely inviting me, a skinny old dying guy, to appear as a mere headless prop in his next sex film workshop video tape. Oh, the offers I get! His strapping

side-kick star of the tape, a self-described sex surrogate/massage therapist prostitute type, told me that he has granted sexual wishes to those in advance stages of their illness. He said he recently accommodated a man, down to skin and bones, and fucked him as one last wish! Oh, honey, I hope you didn't fuck him to death! Poor Joseph missed out. It would have been more interesting to talk to me about my writing than use my shell-shocked body electric - tired and tread-bare from disease and years of sexual mischief. Besides, these days, I'm offering my brain as the organ of choice.

Rita was still in the doctor's office and Richard went in to find her. They came out with her new prescriptions for pain. We talked about having Richard present when she's fully ready, and I started to feel close enough to the situation that I wanted to be there too. We dropped her off and had a good feeling that she would wait at least a week. But that was the last time we saw her alive. Despite the lose of mobility in her hands, she figured out a way to do it all herself, most elegantly, and died that night. I felt so happy and very relieved for her. Rita, you mensch, you did a beautiful thing for all of us.

ROBERT De ANDREIS

# Heaven Can Wait

JANUARY 4, 1994

**L**ast night, as I turned out the lights, it felt okay that I was going to die soon. I curled up under warm blankets in my cozy bed and slept peacefully in the shadow of death. It has taken years of acceptance work, but the payoff has been comforting.

I'm sure I wouldn't be a big death hag under better circumstances but I'd be a total idiot not to come to terms with it by now. There are undeniable reminders; a knobby, metal chestport and scar, an implant in my eye, zilch t-cells, and this recent bout of plummeting white cells that I have to treat with self-injections. Yes, I accept it, but it still breaks my heart. I pray the end stages aren't too bad. I'd be pissed off if I had a horrible end. I'm sure God doesn't want me sulking around heaven with lots of attitude and a chip on my shoulder, then She'd have to go to Hell for a vacation! But

maybe the rudest cut of all will be no afterlife at all, only an eternal test pattern in the sky.

My AIDS life didn't just start these last two full-blown years, it's been the last ten years of AIDS on the brain, the unfolding news stories, those early deaths, the dreaded anticipation. My greatest fear is that one day I may be intubated, which freaks me out the most. It's when they give you sustained oxygen and stick tubes up your nose and down your lungs. The reflex urge to pull them out is so strong, often times your hands are tied down to the bed. Patients can recover, so you can't just pull the plug. But if you ever visit me in this state, pull it anyway when no one's looking, I'll never tell. Let's take a moment and send comforting white light to those in this horribly state, as if it would make a difference.

I had some vanity issue come up this week, mainly because I had new pictures done for a flyer for my upcoming talk. Ultra-professional photographer, Martin Colucci, generously offered to take the shots, although I looked like hell with new AIDS bumps erupting on my face, and my severely dilated, post-op left eye squinting under studio lights. After I saw a first sample Polaroid, and noticed how illness has messed up my

looks, I shrugged, "So what! I'm supposed to look like shit because I have AIDS." Later, when I showed my mom which one we're going to use she had her predictable list of objections. "Sometimes," I told her, "your support is needed more than your opinions."

Martin does beautiful work and also shoots bad boys in those slick nasty men's magazines. I kept hoping he'd break some boundaries with me. I even got down on all fours, purred like a cat, pleading for more exposure, but he refused. I felt so declawed! Maybe he was tipped off by my shrunken head necklace of Byron, the last photographer I had a run in with. Suddenly, everyone's a damn gentleman around me. Why couldn't I find any gentleman all those years when I was a whore? I'm still tempted to do a provocative session with my ex. Why not? I still love the guy. But the last time he was here he was too much of a gentleman too. Maybe I've completely lost my baseline charms and am in complete denial about it. The worse part about AIDS is that I don't get to grow old. I so much wanted to be that old troll in the corner of a dark bar, clutching "Toto," a small yapping dog with a red ribbon around her neck, least we never forget.

My folks just took me to see "My Fair Lady" at the Castro and this new film, "Nell," about a wild woman living in the woods, both about how language shapes our lives. Why couldn't "Nell" have been some hot, wild guy instead of Jodie? But they'd have to change the title. I always had lots more fun with guys who had a limited command of the English language. Sure, I'd like some new, last second AIDS fuck buddy - but I'd only be thinking of my readers and how charmed you'd be by such an occurrence. I'd have to find one that can't read English, or at least one who didn't live near any *Sentinel* racks, or maybe I'll just get a mail order bride from those International Male catalogs. On rare occasions I still miss falling asleep on Bob's big peccs, pillows like they were. But all pillows loose their stuffing. The last time he visited he showed early warning signs of male pattern baldness. You can't wear that baseball cap to bed, honey. Maybe I shouldn't have said that to him. Even his little nephew noticed, "Uncle Bobby! How come you've got skin on your head now?" My only consolation regarding his remarriage is that I had Bob in his prime. His new wife is simply clever with leftovers.

Why am I still single, after all those years of giving it away? You'd think someone would be interested by now - even from an archival stand point, perhaps as a subject for a doctoral science project, where I'd have to crawl around like a rat through a twisted emotional maze just to get that one tired last kiss, dry mouth no less. Gee whiz, I'm missing out on all the fun. Some guys tell me how lucky I am to have my family in town. It's a toss up. You can feel lonely, cut off, sad, frustrated or unsupported in the arms of a lover or at the hands of your loved ones.

My white blood cell counts have plummeted again so I have to give myself injections in my thigh. I fill the needles with Neupogen, at a cost of three hundred dollars a day, open an alcohol swipe and grab the muscle to get ready to dart the needle in. It always seems like it's going to hurt more than it does as I hesitate right before I push it into the skin. OUCH! I just plunged it in while we were talking and hit a nerve. Now I'm pushing in the plunger, pulling out the needle and pressing down on that little red spot. I hope you didn't mind watching but it just hurts less when someone is there with me to share my pain.

ROBERT De ANDREIS



# Interview With A Vampire

JANUARY 11, 1994

**We all have bats in the closet and spent most of our lives hoping they won't fly out. What kind of a life is that, hanging out with wire hangers and dirty dresses? No, this empress has no clothes because her closets are empty.**

When we survive dysfunctional pasts, we build strength for the job ahead. It's our tawdry past that makes us so damn human; what makes us divine is when we share our dark side with someone who needs a light. It's a dying shame MORE personal stories aren't being told, no matter how sordid. The tools are out there to dig yourself out but you have to find them yourself

I've been in denial over disease, too, but it was the other illness of my dual-diagnosis, another major chronic disorder. Yes, I have a mental illness, it's no big deal. I was born with manic-depression, see a shrink once a month for medication and see a therapist weekly for the day to day stuff. This is the first winter I white-knuckled through my low cycle without anti-depressants which are now too harsh on my system. I no longer tolerate their side effects

of sleeplessness, loss of appetite and stomach upset, but I survived.

I wasn't born with a silver spoon up my ass and worked hard at untangling my life so I'm not going to spoon feed you shit, you've got to find your answers yourself. The stigma of mental illness is so great I've worried all week about mentioning it. Years ago I had a terrifying episode where I thought people could read my thoughts. As I was telling my therapist this, I had a breakthrough. That episode wasn't psychotic, it was psychic, a premonition - today many people really DO read my thoughts because I write them! My therapist asked me how I've been able to hold on to the vision that some day I would succeed as a writer. I said that I have been very patient with my mental illness, hoping it would run its course. And it did.

I hate it when people say I don't have hope. I've been carrying a torch for myself for years, hoping like crazy the writer in me would appear against all odds. I was nothing but a retired Catholic school math teacher two years ago, sitting home on disability, waiting to die. It's the hope I have in myself that is more

alive than my dying body and stronger than any two-bit mental illness.

Why carry secrets to the grave? Get real in a support group and dare to speak your truth. Your personal bullshit can fertilize someone else's growth. The recovery movement is cleaning things up because dirt was swept under the rug for generations. I recovered from the most humiliating day of my life when I was raped as a ten year old boy. No one heard me cry myself to sleep each night or suggested therapy either, but I survived. Years later, as the concept of sexual addiction emerged, I learned a painful truth - sometimes untreated sexual abuse survivors slip through the cracks into the sexual underground. Is my slip showing?

I survived another painful day two years ago. I just moved back home from L.A. with "A Course of Miracles" under my belt and wanted to do a lecture series on AIDS. I rented a hall in the Women's building, advertised and did a flyer called "Sex, God, and HIV" with the lines, "T-cell crazy? Lost in Space? Come Home!" A friend flew up from L.A. just to be there on the first day. But a week before, I

contracted PCP, my first AIDS diagnosis. I was frail but went anyway to the first day of this series with my friend, clutching flyers and mailing list clipboards. I was so weak I could barely walk up the stairs. We waited and waited but no one showed up, not one person...I choked back tears, slammed the clipboards down, and gave a brilliant lecture to my friend in this empty hall. He gave me a hug, we folded up chairs and locked up. I ran down those rickety steps and shouted, "THIS TOWN HASN'T SEEN THE LAST OF ME!" Two months later the *Sentinel* job came from out of the blue. So, if there aren't enough seats on Sunday when I'll be interviewed by Evelyn C. White from the Chronicle at MCC, maybe you don't know what time it is.

I got another three hour blood transfusion yesterday to help keep me alive. Eerily, I can FEEL the life force of the person who donated the new blood inside my body. Is this person still alive, did this person receive blood from someone else long before? Last year, when my doctor advised gave me that I had six months to live, I bit my tongue. But later I told him if he ever

advises me like that again, I'll bite his neck.

I once took a poetry class from Stan Rice, husband of vampire writer Anne Rice, who advised us to not use trite words like dawn, crystal or rose. I thought about that at dawn, as the sun rose and I turned down crystal. I woke up with racing thoughts at four in the morning and, instead of sedatives, opted for a walk to clear my head - and that's just what I got. I heard a voice in the shadows, "Got a light?" But speaking here breaks the first taboo - so I broke the second and pulled out my Bic because, baby, he was SOOO damn hot!!! He had that way-hot, nasty boy look that pumps my blood: sultry skin, leather jacket, broken nose, big hose. Was it my sixth sense or his scent on the trail? He offered me drugs but a binge would have sucked something more precious than sex - my time. I can no longer recover from the crash and he wouldn't have recovered from my deadly bite. I kissed this one goodnight because the secret to long term survival is not sucking someone else's blood but finding out what really courses through your veins.

ROBERT De ANDREIS

# Seize The Day

JANUARY 18, 1995

**I**t's completely natural to be reflective at the end, in fact, it's sad if you aren't. I've pulled no punches all my tormented life and won't guild the lily now, especially since I'll be holding one soon.

I thank the reader who wrote the editor comparing my work to all those famous literary dead guys, but I think he did some gilding himself. I don't know for sure. I've never read one single author he mentioned because I hate to read. I'd rather seize the day than be buried in a book.

You can't see my work for what it is because you've grown too close to my story. Sometimes I've been deliberately rude, bitchy, and obnoxious just to push away more fragile souls. The idea that you have formed an emotional bond with me, and that I'm going to die soon, hurts me deeply and as been the central tormenting angst of my work. To my critics who continue to read me: you are committing nothing less than the crude act of reading the diary of a stranger.

While I was doing sit ups, my doctor called with an appointment to get a bone marrow biopsy. But I'm getting my haircut that day so I asked him to change it. The procedure sounds worse than it is. Apparently it's the grinding sound of the thick needle drilling into the hip bone that is most annoying. Since I don't infuse anymore, this quarter-sized raised metal chest port implanted under my skin is useless and unattractive, although it does attract kitchen magnets. I'm glad I still have it because last week I used it at the infusion center for that blood transfusion. I lifted up my shirt with a blank stare so Iris, my nurse, could sterilize the puncture site. She screamed and laughed tears! On the port I had drawn a happy face.

I was unclear all week why I disclosed my dual diagnosis of manic depression. Then I had a revelation while doing the dishes. The skills I learned for coping with manic depression are parallel to living with the good and bad days of terminal illness. With my disorder I never knew from month to month what cycle I'd be in yet I still had to work, look for love, and live. All my temp work and odd jobs hid my bio-

chemic mood shifts. My sex addiction was the only way I could taste love - in short spurts when the mood hit. Today, now that I'm mentally stable from lithium, the challenge is to take my coping skills from those erratic, out of control days, and apply them to my continued desire to seize the day.

I meet my mom every week now, we have lunch and run errands. She recently asked me if I hear from Elliott anymore, since I wrote that cruel article about him. This question stopped our lunch chat cold. How I miss the spell he'd cast over me. When we were together, for those intimate moments, he had the gift to make me forget I was dying. I took that gift and crushed it. "Oh, mom," I said, "I miss holding him so much, why am I so cruel sometimes?"

"Genetics," she said. Since we're both Scorpio's, she knows how deadly our stingers can be.

The interview I gave on Sunday was a wonderful, well produced success. Paradigm, a new outreach program to those with life-threatening illnesses, produced the talk with Evelyn C. White from

the *Chronicle* who was so HOT and so COOL! If only I was a lesbian...

My whole family showed up: my brother Dave did the sound, my sisters and folks were there, along with my Shanti volunteer, and other helpful hands. My mom was totally proud, especially when I told the audience that I never wanted to die ashamed about any parts of my life. I didn't change one word because they were sitting right in front of me because it felt proud to have my whole life laid out in front of them like an open book. Because of my eye surgery, my vision as changed. A question came up about Elliott and I scanned the house looking for him but he was no where in sight so I explained to Evelyn how, in the beginning, I had no other way of communicating with him, other than my stories. Over the months I courted him into my life through my writing. During the intermission, I noticed two people quietly leaving - it was Elliott and his brave lover!

It was a dark and stormy night when the doorbell rang. It could only be one person. I peered out the peephole and gasped. It was Elliott! I threw the door open and flashed my

smile. He stood there, pelted by rain, excited, drunk and a little bit scared. "Oh, Elliott," I said, "words fail me." I never thought I'd see him again, the last of my secret lovers, the last lips I'd ever kiss. Months before, in a fit of rage, I spit out some of the most vicious barbs I'd ever written and now I know why. We were getting close again. I pushed him away, not from fear of intimacy, but because I loved him. I didn't want to put him through the final stages of my illness. I wanted him to hate me now instead of grieve me later. I knelt down before him and closed my eyes. "Do it, Elliott, you know I deserve it and so much more. Do it for you and for any other readers I've hurt this year. DO IT!" WHACK! He slapped me so hard I fell over. He grabbed me by the hair. WHACK! This time I screamed and covered my face because his wedding ring hit my fragile eye, still recovering from surgery. I burst into tears realizing how close I came to losing part of my vision at the hands of my sharp tongue. He knelt down and we did one of the most intimate thing two people can do - I apologized and he forgave me.

ROBERT De ANDREIS

# Lonely Hearts Club

FEBRUARY 1, 1995

**T**here is a new level of awareness I am having difficulty accepting regarding my terminal disease. It is a sadder, deeper, yet more real assessment of what is going on. If you're not sick, I don't expect you to understand.

For the past few nights, I have waken up in the middle of the night from vivid dreams of former boyfriends. The dreams are always the same - I am trying to reconcile or coax them back. The sentiment is clear - that there is something I did to push them away or there is something I can do to win them back. Those are both false, cruel premises that, once again, blame the victim. The pulling away of boyfriends, family, friends and acquaintances is a typical response to the ill person - you are not doing anything wrong, your

complaints about your condition are not inappropriate; also the loved ones are not evil, heartless people, either - just uneducated.

I mentioned to a friend that I am having a hard time breaking through my isolation, that I can't seem to make new friends or replace the ones who've died or withdrawn - I'm not working, I had to sell my car, I have no extra money, it's just harder to socialize with full blown AIDS. He said, "Well, just go out and meet new people!" That is the mind set of a well person, as if there was some short suit on my part that is preventing me from connecting. No! The well person can't begin to understand the gradual intolerance of rejection, the erosion of self-confidence, the insecurities, and sometimes the sheer apathy that breaks down the usual dynamics of social connecting. The longer you survive, the less you end up with. Long-term survivor end up adjusting to a lower set of acceptable standards and relegate themselves to living in a smaller world.

It has become increasingly difficult for me to relate to well people; their problems seem small and their comprehension of my life seems even smaller. Conversely, what seems incomprehensible to them - my nonchalant grueling treatments, biopsies, and prognoses - are

part of my daily life; yet the onus is still on the sick to teach the well, to coax them back in because they can walk away in a minute and join the rest of the mainstream and forget about you in a snap. If the sick person doesn't teach the well person about his constantly shifting needs, an endlessly tiring act, the ill person is left with nothing but silence.

One thing that seems so amazing to well people is the forthright resolve that some sick people have about their condition. I recently met cleared-eyed Marc, my age, who is self-identified as terminal. He had been a pretty, gay boy most of his life, where sex had been an intrinsic part of his reason d'être. Today, we both are stuck in a new world of social alienation, loss of attractiveness, diminished participation in sexual arenas we once dominated. It's as if we were plucked off the fast lane and thrown into a retirement home and told, "Deal with it." Marc had a very astute observation in explaining his heightened level of acceptance - the nature of the illness also awards you endless hours alone to contemplate it. He said that it was all those private, endless days in the hospital that gave him the space to fully accept his new life.

I have more in common these days with beautiful, terminal men like Marc. But

where do you meet other hot, healthy men with AIDS in this town? There are no social outlets, besides support groups, for us to connect in a light hearted social way. I can hardly call 976-AIDS to meet one of the thousands of HIV positive men who are sexually active in town. Today I ran into a former trick on the street. We used to get together all the time and these days it would have been so tempting to call him for a fun night's play. After we talked I had to tell him the truth. "The real reason I haven't called you is because I'm HIV positive." Which is only half the story. Boy, that wall came down and he didn't even thank me for my honesty or my interest in protecting him. Connecting with people again, in an honest way, becomes an increasing insurmountable task until the effort becomes too exasperating and the payoff too small.

These past two months I have been in a period of temporary wellness. Now that the traumas are over I realize that my life has been structured around the ill times - when I get sick all my caregivers are waiting in the wings, my house is set up for rest, I can heal myself just fine. But the question remains - what's in place for my well days? Nothing. I have gone stir crazy trying to drum up a life for myself, trying to enjoy these

good days of wellness. But there aren't any friends in place, people I have a real history with, there is no social context for me to slip into and enjoy. I love my folks but I get tired of seeing them every week. I've been a gay man for twenty years and never spent this much time with them before. I am not interested in attending one more support group where all the men are older than me. Yet, what to do? I can tell my readers endlessly that this column doesn't help matters but you still wouldn't believe me. If anything, this column as isolated me from old friends who annoyingly tell me they don't call me because they keep up with me through my articles. Isn't that the height of rudeness?

I have become friends with Tony, my Shanti volunteer, which is the best you can hope for, the most hope the AIDS support world has to offer its most critical members. I know my column acts as a bridge to lonely people separated from the world by disease. It's time to learn about that world and see it for what it is, unfortunately the teaching stars keep falling. We need a better understanding of the terminally ill, our needs, desires and dreams, to fully appreciate the life force of the dying experience. Quick, make a wish

ROBERT De ANDREIS

# The Healing Circle

FEBRUARY 8, 1995

**T**oo often, in the middle of the night, you can spy me in my garden with a shovel, digging my own premature grave. I have to bonk myself in the head with that shovel to remind me that I'm not dead yet and there's still a lot of planting left for me to do.

Last week I met Greg Cassin to discuss where I might go with my last minute, death and dying career. I first met Greg, who is the director for the Center for Living, last year in a family life class my mom taught. Greg has the ability to make high school kids sit up and listen to AIDS and gay issues, which is quite a gift indeed.

I told him how I miss my last five years in front of the classroom where the student feedback is so immediate. Writing can be so solitary. He invited me to conduct a writing exercise during his Thursday

night healing circle at the center; so, I showed up there last night. Lately, I've been aware of the therapeutic powers of writing, my work has had a transformative effect on my own personal growth. I told this group that, as a people besieged by death, we need to write our stories down, lest they be lost forever. Years from now people will want to know, "Who were they, how did they cope and what was in their hearts?" Writing, journalizing, or sending letters to family - telling them things you can never verbalize, is a wonderful gift you can give yourself.

The evening went well. It was a refreshing change of pace for me. I slyly got some phone numbers of some attractive guys by pretending to be so fascinated with their fledgling writing skills. ("Why don't you come over some night and I'll show you my column?") Unfortunately, I usually feel too awkward to ever call anyone back. Actually, this was a warm up for me because I just started teaching a four week writing workshop in my home near the Castro,

For an exercise, I had them write their own obituary. Afterwards, Greg had the room split into groups of three and did an exercise where we take turns laying hands on each other, in loving ways. The

power of the human touch is a vastly underrated healing device. Both the guys who were my partners put their hands all over me. It had been a long time since I've been touched like that. I left recharged and felt connected with vital people again. I'm planning to do another exercise with the group at the beginning of next month and possibly start a writing class at the center if there's enough interest. One of the guys who had been my partner during that touching exercise gave me a ride home. He has rapidly spreading lymphoma and his doctors told him he might have a few weeks to live. But there was nothing in his demeanor or appearance to indicate eminent death. He has such a level of acceptance of his situation that it boggles the mind. But the most amazing thing is that he just bought a new computer to write his first novel. The dying experience can bring to life many unborn creative desires.

Meeting new people as taken the edge off my recent dating anxieties with fatally attractive Marc, who has pulmonary KS, the fastest spreading and most deadly. Despite the prognosis, he, too, seems remarkable clear about everything. I am convinced that people like this weren't around as much ten years ago; the longevity of the epidemic as created a hybrid of

consciousness that allows some of us to enjoy high-functioning, peaceful lives despite, or because of, our terminal status. Some amazing things have come out of this health crisis. Just as our prophetic subculture used to lead the way in fashion tips and trends, we are once again beacons of light as we lead our mainstream culture beyond the darkness of death. The world wants to know, "Exactly how are those guys coping so well with such devastation?" Practice, my dear.

But trying to go out with Marc on a simple date turned me into a nervous wreck. I haven't had a date since high school. In fact I didn't even date in high school. As gay people, we don't always develop effective dating skills, at least I never did. Although we both had been participants in the gay sex world all those years, somehow, in the simplicity of the evening, with the awkward compliments and a bottle of wine, I felt as if my virginity had been restored, or at least reheated.

I got home last night after that group, all pumped up, and decided to take a walk to the park. I pulled off my sweater, put on my leather jacket and grabbed my cigarettes. I always like one after sex, so I'm down to a couple a week now. It was such a balmy night, that place was crawling with

men. Shadows vanished as city lights flashed through passing silhouettes. Halfway down a trail I caught the eye of this straight boy type. Don't ask me what I did to get his attention - let's just say it works every time. When his hand inched up my tight stomach towards my metal chest port, I quickly laid my hand over it, pretending to play with my nipple. This was not the time to talk t-cells. Suddenly, we were startled by an onlooker. I could see, by the glow in his eyes, that he was even hotter than the guy in front of me. Soon, we stood in a tight circle as my hands felt their warm skin. In a holy instant, I realized these were different hands. These were the healing hands from the exercise we did earlier at the center. I found myself touching them both in loving ways and was finally able to forgive myself for all those years I treated men in loveless ways. In the heat of passion, I thanked God for the insight and for one more steamy night of being alive.

ROBERT De ANDREIS

# Cruel And Unusual Punishment

FEBRUARY 15, 1995

**T**he darkest side that I have is not all the sordid details of my past, but the side that as always connected with some higher source in a deeply personal way. Yes, I have a personal relationship with God, like everyone else, I'm just not afraid to admit it.

Never, in all my years of being an out of control sex addict, did I feel I was ever doing anything morally wrong, although the untreated behavior did affected my intimacy issues. Last week the S.F. Weekly did a cover story on the closure of St. Brigid's church, where I had been raised as a casual Catholic. All my early childhood religious memories are from that church, whose doors are forever closed despite the outcry of the parishioners. I had planned to be buried from that church; now, I fear, my ashes will be flushed out to sea. Last year, when the story first broke, I wanted to stay out of the fray fearing that they might close it SOONER if they found out I spent my formative years there contemplating its subtle, homoerotic church art.

ROBERT De ANDREIS

Most God concepts are absurd - to personify the creator of the universe as a judge with gender and patriarchal qualities certainly cast God in a limited light. Unfortunately, this lower order concept, the way most of us are taught, as perpetuated an historic cruelty that has created a climate of shame and hatred for gay people. I pity the poor gay person who prays at a homophobic church thinking he's doing the right thing. Who wants to worship in Uncle Tom's chapel?

Lower order religious thought is straight out of the dark ages, where bloody crusades, murder and bashing, can be justified my misquoting the spirit of the Bible - which is a cardinal sin in my book. Higher order thought knows that the expanse of God is way too much for our man-made minds to fully grasp. Because of this vast, unknowable mystery, we are asked not to solve it, but to simply give and receive love. Forget the Bible, forget the Ten Commandments, forget all those zany religious zealots, nothing is more central to any workable concept of God than love - pure and simple. So when people say that AIDS is a

punishment from God and that homosexuality is evil, those people are the unloving ones. They are saying that God would create some of us gay then punish us for being that way! Who wants to believe that God's an asshole?

AIDS, cancer, disease, earthquakes, floods and male pattern baldness are all part of the natural landscape of creation. These things are integral parts of the ever-changing face of the physical plane. It's only in our slightly retarded, ego minds do we ascribe value and meaning to natural disasters. The sophisticated veil of technology covers a barbaric perception of God. Think about how much technology as exploded into the world within in the past ten years. Yet our collective consciousness around God remains grounded in a darker age. Even the so-called New Age, while successful in bringing some of the better Eastern concepts to our Western blockhead selves, bastardized much of it to fit the low ball mind set of materialism. Ancient creative visualization techniques are often taught by ego-driven teachers to promise the bigger car, the

better job, the pumped up pecs - not simple peace of mind.

Also, any New Age practitioner who promises you a healing of the body ought to be shot; in every advanced way they know better and are playing into your weakness. Healings can occur on the physical plane but for mysterious reason, filled with the higher purpose of God's plan - not yours. You can achieve a brilliant state of enlightenment and still get hit by a bus - you didn't do anything wrong - we're suppose to die, it's a natural kingdom thing. How cruel it is to make devotees of spirituality feel like a failure at the end of their lives because they couldn't pray away their symptoms - as if their KS was a laundry stain issue and meditation could simply shout it out.

The saddest cruelty is the way the dominate religious culture has made us gay children of God feel disfranchised from the deepest and most sacred part of ourselves by stripping us of spiritual dignity. Our occasional self-hatred as been programmed in by religions who try and tear us apart from our loving creator. Religions perpetuate evil when they

teach hatred and judgment. Now that modern science is realizing that homosexuality is genetic, in religious terms, it simple means that God made us this way and that we OWN the whole God thing along with everyone else. Higher thought would have me praying for my right wing oppressors. But my lower self feels much more comfortable dishing them as pure evil.

I always felt that God was on my side, despite my difficult life. All that God energy helped me heal myself. I never for a minute felt that there was anything wrong with me being gay and never felt that AIDS was a punishment from God. Although, in some twisted way, AIDS is a punishment - punishing those who believe in a punitive God, punishing those with hate-filled family values by taking away their scorned gay children. We, who die of AIDS, are not punished; God simple wants to call us home sooner because he misses our fabulous selves and wants to hang out with us forever. Same-sex love and self-love are essential extensions of God's love, and just as eternal. It's time to reclaim our spiritual inheritance as gay people and remember that God is always on our side.

I would like to thank the following people for their help and support: Ray Chalker, owner and publisher of the S.F. Sentinel, Michael Colbruno and the staff of the S.F. Sentinel, Robert Barnes; my wonderful Dad and family, especially my brother David; "Elliot" and all the other sorted real life characters for letting me use their personal stories; my former lover, Bob; Dr. Richard Wagner, PhD. and Paradigm, David Cardenas, Robert Banks and Photographer Dave Henry, Evelyn C. White; my two therapist Ronald and Raymond; my doctor David and my favorite nurses: Jerry, Iris, Anna, Jamy, and Pat; my two volunteers, Tony and Tim; and the incredible love and support I received from each and every reader who wrote me this year - your letters carried me through each week like you'll never know.

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